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THE WORST WITCH

and

A BAD SPELL FOR THE WORST WITCH

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(*with Rose Griffiths*)

THE WORST WITCH

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For Reeeney

CHAPTER ONE

MISS CACKLE'S Academy for Witches stood at the top of a high mountain surrounded by a pine forest. It looked more like a prison than a school, with its gloomy grey walls and turrets. Sometimes you could see the pupils on their broomsticks flitting like bats above the playground wall, but usually the place was half hidden in mist, so that if you glanced up at the mountain you would probably not notice the building was there at all.

Everything about the school was dark and shadowy: long, narrow corridors and winding staircases – and of course the girls

themselves, dressed in black gymslips, black stockings, black hob-nailed boots, grey shirts and black-and-grey ties. Even their summer dresses were black-and-grey checked. The only touches of colour were the sashes round their gymslips – a different colour for each house – and the school badge, which was a black cat sitting on a yellow moon. For special occasions, such as prize-giving or Hallowe'en, there was another uniform consisting of a long robe worn with a tall, pointed hat, but as these were black too, it didn't really make much of a change.

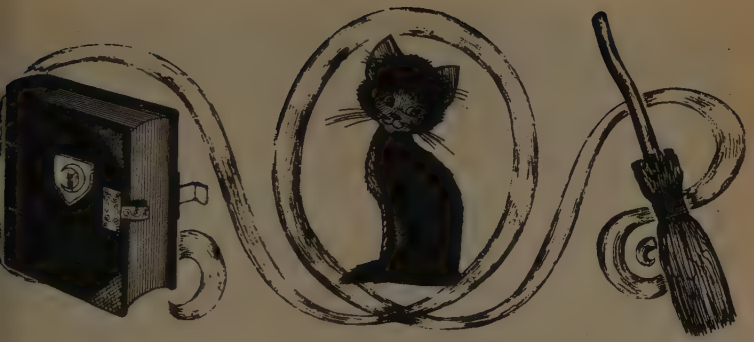
There were so many rules that you couldn't do *any*thing without being told off, and there seemed to be tests and exams every week.

Mildred Hubble was in her first year at the school. She was one of those people who always seem to be in trouble. She didn't exactly mean to break rules and

annoy the teachers, but things just seemed to *happen* whenever she was around. You could rely on Mildred to have her hat on back-to-front or her bootlaces trailing along the floor. She couldn't walk from one end of a corridor to the other without someone yelling at her, and nearly every night she was writing lines or being kept in (not that there was anywhere to go if you were allowed out). Anyway, she had lots of friends, even if they did keep their distance in the potion laboratory, and her best friend Maud stayed loyally by her through everything, however hair-raising. They made a funny pair, for Mildred was tall and thin with long plaits which she often chewed absent-mindedly (another thing she was told off about), while Maud was short and tubby, had round glasses and wore her hair in bunches.

On her first day at the academy each

pupil was given a broomstick and taught to ride it, which takes quite a long time and isn't nearly as easy as it looks. Halfway through the first term they were each presented with a black kitten which they trained to ride the broomsticks. The cats weren't for any practical purpose except to keep tradition going; some schools present owls instead, but it's just a matter of taste. Miss Cackle was a very traditional headmistress who did not believe in any new-fangled nonsense and trained her young witches to keep up all the customs that had been taught in her young day. At the end of the first year, each pupil received a copy of *The Popular Book of Spells*, a three-inch thick volume bound in black leather. This was not really to be used, as they already had paperback editions for the classroom, but like the cats it was another piece of tradition. Apart from yearly prize-giving, there were no



more presentations until the fifth and final year when most pupils were awarded the Witches' Higher Certificate. It did not seem likely that Mildred would ever get that far. After only two days at the school she crashed her broomstick into the yard wall, breaking the broomstick in half and bending her hat. She mended the stick with glue and sticky-tape, and fortunately it still flew, though there was an ugly bundle where the ends joined and sometimes it was rather difficult to control.

This story really begins halfway

through Mildred's first term, on the night before the presentation of the kittens . . .

It was almost midnight and the school was in darkness except for one narrow window lit softly by the glow of a candle. This was Mildred's room where she was sitting in bed, wearing a pair of black-and-grey striped pyjamas and dropping off to sleep every few minutes. Maud was curled up on the end of the bed enveloped in a grey flannel nightdress and a black woollen shawl. Each pupil had the same type of room: very simple, with a wardrobe, iron bedstead, table and chair, and a slit window like the ones used by archers in castles of long ago. There was a picture-rail along the bare walls from which hung a sampler embroidered with a quotation from *The Book of Spells* and also, during the day, several bats. Mildred had three bats in her room, little furry ones which were very friendly. She was fond of

animals and was looking forward to the next day when she would have a kitten of her own. Everyone was very excited about the presentation, and they had all spent the evening ironing their best robes and pushing the dents out of their best hats. Maud was too excited to sleep, so had sneaked into Mildred's room to talk about it with her friend.

'What are you going to call yours, Maud?' asked Mildred, sleepily.

'Midnight,' said Maud. 'I think it sounds dramatic.'

'I'm worried about the whole thing,' Mildred confessed, chewing the end of her plait. 'I'm sure I'll do something dreadful like treading on its tail, or else it'll take one look at me and leap out of the window. *Some*thing's bound to go wrong.'

'Don't be silly,' said Maud. 'You know you have a way with animals. And as for treading on its tail, it won't even be on the floor. Miss Cackle hands it to you, and that's all there is to it. So there's nothing to worry about, is there?'

Before Mildred had time to reply, the door crashed open to reveal their form-mistress Miss Hardbroom standing in the doorway wrapped in a black dressing-gown, with a lantern in her hand. She

was a tall, terrifying lady with a sharp, bony face and black hair scragged back into such a tight knot that her forehead looked quite stretched.

'Rather late to be up, isn't it, girls?' she inquired nastily.

The girls, who had leapt into each other's arms when the door burst open, drew apart and fixed their eyes on the floor.

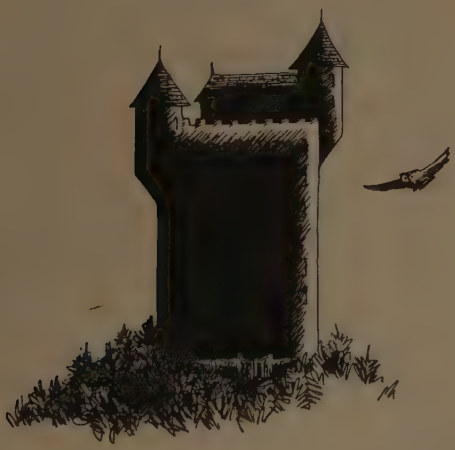
'Of course, if we don't want to be included in the presentation tomorrow we are certainly going about it the right way,' Miss Hardbroom continued icily.

'Yes, Miss Hardbroom,' chorused the girls miserably.

Miss Hardbroom glared meaningfully at Mildred's candle and swept out into the corridor with Maud in front of her.

Mildred hastily blew out the candle and dived under the bedclothes, but she could not get to sleep. Outside the window

she could hear the owls hooting, and somewhere in the school a door had been left open and was creaking backwards and forwards in the wind. To tell you the truth, Mildred was afraid of the dark, but don't tell anyone. I mean, whoever heard of a *witch* who was scared of the dark?



CHAPTER TWO

THE presentation took place in the Great Hall, a huge stone room with rows of wooden benches, a raised platform at one end and shields and portraits all round the walls. The whole school had assembled, and Miss Cackle and Miss Hardbroom stood behind a table on the platform. On the table was a large wicker basket from which came mews and squeaks.

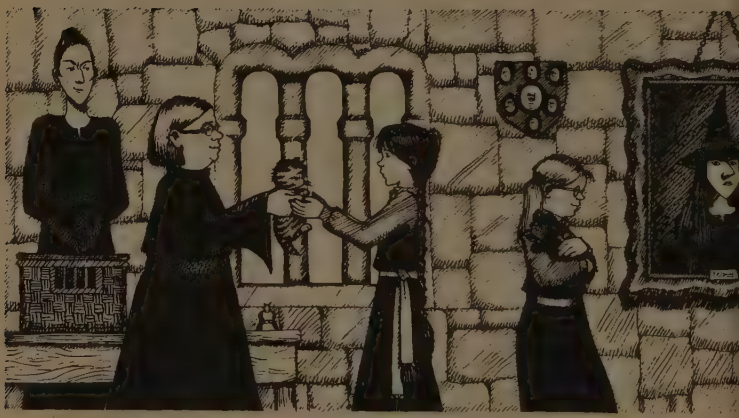
First of all everyone sang the school song, which went like this:

Onward, ever striving onward,
Proudly on our brooms we fly
Straight and true above the treetops,
Shadows on the moonlit sky.

Ne'er a day will pass before us
When we have not tried our best,
Kept our cauldrons bubbling nicely,
Cast our spells and charms with zest.

Full of joy we mix our potions,
Working by each other's side.
When our days at school are over
Let us think of them with pride.

It was the usual type of school song, full



of pride, joy and striving. Mildred had never yet mixed a potion with joy, nor flown her broomstick with pride – she was usually too busy trying to keep upright!

Anyway, when they had finished droning the last verse, Miss Cackle rang the little silver bell on her table and the girls marched up in single file to receive their kittens. Mildred was the last of all, and when she reached the table Miss Cackle pulled out of the basket not a sleek black kitten like all the others but a little tabby with white paws and the sort of fur that looked as if it had been out all night in a gale.

'We ran out of black ones,' explained Miss Cackle with a pleasant grin.

Miss Hardbroom smiled too, but nastily.

After the ceremony everyone rushed to see Mildred's kitten.

'I think H.B. had a hand in this some-

where,' said Maud darkly. ('H.B.' was their nickname for Miss Hardbroom.)

'I must admit, it does look a bit dim, doesn't it?' said Mildred, scratching the tabby kitten's head. 'But I don't really mind. I'll just have to think of another name – I was going to call it Sooty. Let's take them down to the playground and see what they make of broomstick riding.'

Almost all the first-year witches were in the yard trying to persuade their puzzled kittens to sit on their broomsticks. Several were already clinging on by their claws, and one kitten, belonging to a rather smug young witch named Ethel, was sitting bolt upright cleaning its paws, as if it had been broomstick riding all its life!

Riding a broomstick was no easy matter, as I have mentioned before. First, you ordered the stick to hover, and it hovered lengthways above the ground. Then you sat on it, gave it a sharp tap,

and away you flew. Once in the air you could make the stick do almost anything by saying, 'Right! Left! Stop! Down a bit!' and so on. The difficult part was balancing, for if you leaned a little too far to one side you could easily overbalance, in which case you would either fall off or find yourself hanging upside-down and then you would just have to hold on with your skirt over your head until a friend came to your rescue.

It had taken Mildred several weeks of falling off and crashing before she could ride the broomstick reasonably well, and it looked as though her kitten was going to have the same trouble. When she put it on the end of the stick, it just fell off without even trying to hold on. After many attempts, Mildred picked up her kitten and gave it a shake.

'Listen!' she said severely. 'I think I shall have to call you Stupid. You don't

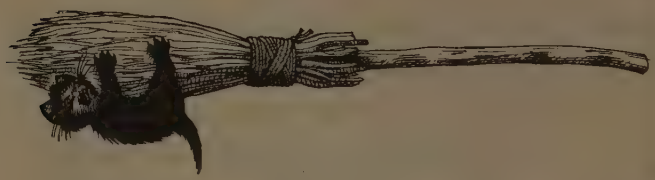
even *try* to hold on. Everyone else is all right – look at all your friends.'

The kitten gazed at her sadly and licked her nose with its rough tongue.

'Oh, come on,' said Mildred, softening her voice. 'I'm not really angry with you. Let's try again.'

And she put the kitten back on the broomstick, from which it fell with a thud.

Maud was having better luck. Her kitten was hanging on grimly upside down.



'Oh, well,' laughed Maud. 'It's a start.'

'Mine's useless,' said Mildred, sitting on the broomstick for a rest.

'Never mind,' Maud said. 'Think how

hard it must be for them to hang on by their claws.'

An idea flashed into Mildred's head, and she dived into the school, leaving her kitten chasing a leaf along the ground and the broomstick still patiently hovering. She came out carrying her satchel which she hooked over the end of the broom and then bundled the kitten into it. The kitten's astounded face peeped out of the bag as Mildred flew delightedly round the yard.

'Look, Maud!' she called from ten feet up in the air.

'That's cheating!' said Maud, looking at the satchel.

Mildred flew back and landed on the ground laughing.

'I don't think H.B. will approve,' said Maud doubtfully.

'Quite right, Maud,' an icy voice behind them said. 'Mildred, my dear, possibly it would be even easier with handlebars and a saddle.'

Mildred blushed.

'I'm sorry, Miss Hardbroom,' she muttered. 'It doesn't balance very well – my kitten, so ... I thought ... perhaps ...' Her voice trailed away under Miss Hardbroom's stony glare and Mildred unhooked her satchel and turned the bewildered kitten on to the ground.

'Girls!' Miss Hardbroom clapped her hands. 'I would remind you that there is

a potion test tomorrow morning. That is all.'

So saying, she disappeared – literally.

'I wish she wouldn't do that,' whispered Maud, looking at the place where their form-mistress had been standing. 'You're never quite sure whether she's gone or not.'

'Right again, Maud,' came Miss Hardbroom's voice from nowhere.

Maud gulped and hurried back to her kitten.

CHAPTER THREE

DO you remember I told you about a certain young witch named Ethel who had succeeded in teaching her kitten from the very first try? Ethel was one of those lucky people for whom everything goes right. She was always top of the class, her spells always worked, and Miss Hardbroom never made any icy remarks to her. Because of this, Ethel was often rather bossy with the other girls.

On this occasion she had overheard the whole of Mildred's encounter with Miss Hardbroom and couldn't resist being nasty about it.

'I think Miss Cackle gave you that cat on purpose,' Ethel sneered. 'You're both as bad as each other.'

'Oh, be quiet,' said Mildred, trying to keep her temper. 'Anyway, it's not a bad cat. It'll learn in time.'

'Like you did?' Ethel went on. 'Wasn't it last week that you crashed into the dustbins?'

'*Look*, Ethel,' Mildred said, 'you'd better be quiet, because if you don't I shall . . .'

'Well?'

'I shall have to turn you into a frog – and I don't want to do that.'

Ethel gave a shriek of laughter.

'That's really funny!' she crowed. 'You don't even know the beginners' spells, let alone ones like that.'

Mildred blushed and looked very miserable.

'Go on, then!' cried Ethel. 'Go *on*, then,

if you're so clever. *Turn* me into a frog! I'm waiting.'

It just so happened that Mildred did have an idea of that spell (she had been reading about it in the library). By now, everyone had crowded round, waiting to see what would happen, and Ethel was still jeering. It was unbearable.

Mildred muttered the spell under her breath – and Ethel vanished. In her place stood a small pink and grey pig.

Cries and shouts rent the air:

'Oh, no!'

'That's torn it!'

'You've done it now, Mildred!'

Mildred was horrified. 'Oh, Ethel,' she said. 'I'm sorry, but you did ask for it.'

The pig looked furious.

'You *beast*, Mildred Hubble!' it grunted. 'Change me back!'

At that moment Miss Hardbroom suddenly appeared in the middle of the yard.

'Where is Ethel Hallow?' she asked. 'Miss Bat would like to see her about extra chanting lessons.'

Her sharp gaze fell on the small pig which was grunting softly at her feet.

'What is this animal doing in the yard?' she asked, coldly.

Everyone looked at Mildred

'I ... let it in, Miss Hardbroom,' Mildred said hesitantly.

'Well, you can just let it out again, please,' said Miss Hardbroom.

'Oh, I can't do that!' gasped the unhappy Mildred. 'I mean, well ... er ... Couldn't I keep it as a pet?'

'I think you have quite enough trouble coping with yourself and that kitten without adding a pig to your worries,' replied Miss Hardbroom, staring at the tabby kitten which was peering round Mildred's ankles. 'Let it out at once! Now, where is Ethel?'

Mildred bent down.

'Ethel, dear,' she whispered coaxingly in the pig's ear. 'Will you go out when I tell you to? Please, Ethel, I'll let you in again straight away afterwards.'

Pleading with people like Ethel never works. It only makes them feel their power.

'I *won't* go!' bellowed the pig. 'Miss Hardbroom, I *am* Ethel! Mildred Hubble turned me into a pig.'

Nothing ever surprised Miss Hardbroom. Even this startling piece of news only caused her to raise one slanting eyebrow.

'Well, Mildred,' she said, 'I am glad to know that you have at least learned *one* thing since you came here. However, as you will have noticed in the Witches' Code, rule number seven, paragraph two, it is not customary to practise such tricks

on your fellows. Please remove the spell at once.'

'I'm afraid I don't know how to,' Mildred confessed, in a very small voice.

Miss Hardbroom stared at her for a few moments.

'Then you had better go and look it up in the library,' she said, wearily. 'Take Ethel with you, and on your way drop in and tell Miss Bat why Ethel will be late.'

Mildred picked up her kitten and hurried inside, followed by the pig. Fortunately, Miss Bat was not in her room, but it was most embarrassing going into the library. Ethel was grunting loudly on purpose and everyone stared so much that Mildred could have crawled under the table.

'Hurry up,' moaned the pig.

'Oh, stop going on!' said Mildred, as she flicked hastily through the huge spell book. 'It's all your fault, anyway. You actually *asked* me to do it. I don't see why you're complaining.'

'I said a frog, not a pig,' said Ethel, pettily. 'You couldn't even do *that* right.'

Mildred ignored the grunting Ethel and kept looking in the book. It took her half an hour to find the right spell, and

soon after that Ethel was her horrible self again. The people in the library were most surprised to see the pig suddenly change into a furious-looking Ethel.

'Now, don't be angry, Ethel,' Mildred said softly. 'Remember: "Silence in the library at all times".'

And she rushed into the corridor.

'Wasn't that awful, Cat?' she said to the kitten, which was curled up inside her cardigan. 'I think I'd better put you in my room and then go and revise for the potion test. Don't tease the bats, will you?'

CHAPTER FOUR

IT was the morning of the potion test, and the girls were filing into the potion lab, each hoping she had learned the right spell, except for Ethel who knew everything and never worried about such matters.

'Come along, girls! Two to a cauldron!' barked Miss Hardbroom. 'Today we shall make a laughter potion. No textbooks to be used – put that book away this *instant*, Mildred! Work quietly, and when you have finished you may take a small sip of the mixture to make sure it

is correctly made. You may begin.'

Maud and Mildred were sharing a cauldron, of course, but unfortunately neither of them had learned that particular spell.

'I think I can remember it vaguely,' whispered Maud. 'Bits of it, anyway.' She began to sort through the ingredients which had been laid out on each workbench.

When everything was stirred together in the cauldron, the bubbling liquid was bright pink. Mildred stared at it doubtfully.

'I'm sure it should be green,' she said. 'In fact I'm sure we should have put in a handful of pondweed-gathered-at-midnight.'

'Are you *sure*?' asked Maud.

'Yes ...,' replied Mildred, not very definitely.

'*Absolutely* sure?' Maud asked again.

'You know what happened last time.'

'I'm *quite* sure,' insisted Mildred. 'Anyway, there's a handful of pondweed laid out on each bench. I'm positive we're supposed to put it in.'

'Oh, all right,' said Maud. 'Go on, then. It can't do any harm.'

Mildred grabbed the pondweed and dropped it into the mixture. They took turns at stirring it for a few minutes until it began to turn dark green.

'What a horrid colour,' said Maud.

'Are you ready, girls?' asked Miss Hardbroom, rapping on her desk. 'You should have been ready minutes ago. A laughter potion should be made quickly for use in an emergency.'

Ethel was still working on the bench in front of Mildred, who stood on tiptoe to sneak a look at the colour of Ethel's potion. To her horror, it was bright pink.

'Oh, no,' Mildred thought, with a

sinking feeling. 'I wonder what potion we've made?'

Miss Hardbroom banged on the desk again.

'We shall now test the potion,' she commanded. 'Not too much, please. We don't want anyone hysterical.'

Each pupil took a test-tubeful of liquid and drank a little. At once shrieks of laughter rang through the room, especially from Ethel's bench where they had made the best potion of all and were laughing so much that tears rolled down their cheeks. The only two girls who weren't laughing were Mildred and Maud.

'Oh, dear,' said Maud. 'I feel most peculiar. Why aren't we laughing, Mil?'

'I hate to tell you,' confessed Mildred, 'I think –' But before she had time to say any more, the two girls had disappeared!

'Cauldron number two!' snapped Miss

Hardbroom. 'You seem to have made the wrong spell.'

'It was my fault,' said Mildred's voice from behind the cauldron.

'That I do not doubt,' Miss Hardbroom said sourly. 'You had both better sit down until you reappear, and then, Mildred, perhaps a trip to Miss Cackle's office would do you some good. You can explain why I sent you.'

Everyone had left the room by the time the two young witches finally began to reappear. This was a very slow process, with first the head and then the rest of the body becoming gradually visible.

'I'm sorry,' said Mildred's head and shoulders.

'That's all right,' said Maud's head. 'I just wish you'd *think* a bit more. We had the right potion to start with.'

'Sorry,' mumbled Mildred again, then she began to laugh. 'Hey, Maud, you do

look funny with just your head showing!'

At once they both began to laugh, and soon they were best friends again.

'I suppose I'd better go and see Old Cackle now,' said Mildred, when she had completely reappeared.

'I'll come with you to the door,' offered Maud.

Miss Cackle was small and very fat, with short grey hair and green horn-rimmed glasses which she usually wore

pushed up on top of her head. She was the exact opposite of Miss Hardbroom, being absent-minded in appearance and rather gentle by nature. The girls were not in the least bit afraid of her, whereas Miss Hardbroom could reduce any of them to a miserable heap with just one word. Miss Cackle used a different technique. By always being friendly and pleased to see a pupil in her office, she made them feel embarrassed if they had something unpleasant to tell her, as Mildred nearly always had.

Mildred knocked at Miss Cackle's door, hoping she would be out. She wasn't.

'Come in!' called the familiar voice from inside.

Mildred opened the door and went in. Miss Cackle, glasses on her nose for once, was busily writing in a huge register. She looked up and peered over her spectacles.

'Ah, Mildred,' she said pleasantly.

'Come and sit down while I finish filling in this register.'

Mildred closed the door and sat by Miss Cackle's desk.

'I wish she wasn't so pleased to see me,' she thought.

Miss Cackle slammed the register shut and pushed her glasses on to the top of her head.

'Now, Mildred, what can I do for you?'

Mildred twisted her fingers together.

'Well, actually, Miss Cackle,' she began slowly, 'Miss Hardbroom sent me to see you because I made the wrong potion again.'

The smile faded from the headmistress's face and she sighed, as if with deep disappointment. Mildred felt about an inch high.

'*Really*, Mildred,' Miss Cackle said in a tired voice, 'I have run out of things to say to you. Week after week you come here,

sent by every member of staff in the school, and my words just seem to go straight in one ear and out of the other. You will never get the Witches' Higher Certificate if this appalling conduct continues. You must be the worst witch in the entire school. Whenever there's any trouble you are nearly always to be found at the bottom of it, and it's just not good enough, my dear. Now, what have you to say for yourself *this* time?'

'I don't really know, Miss Cackle,' Mildred said humbly. 'Everything I do just seems to go wrong, that's all. I don't *mean* to do it.'

'Well, that's no excuse, is it?' said Miss Cackle. 'Everyone else manages to live without causing an uproar wherever they go. You must pull yourself together, Mildred. I don't want to hear *any* more bad reports about you, do you understand?'

'Yes, Miss Cackle,' said Mildred, in as sorry a voice as she could manage.

'Run along, then,' said the headmistress, 'and remember what I have said to you.'

Maud was waiting in the corridor, eager to know what had been said, when her friend came out of the office.

'She's nice really,' Mildred said. 'Just told me all the usual things. She hates

telling people off. I'll have to try to be better from now on. Come on, let's go and give the kittens another broomstick lesson.'

CHAPTER FIVE

THE following morning, Miss Hardbroom strode into the classroom looking thoughtful. She was wearing a new grey-and-black striped dress, with a brooch at the shoulder.

'Good morning, girls,' she greeted them, not as sharply as usual.

'Good morning, Miss Hardbroom,' chorused the girls.

Their form-mistress arranged the books on her desk and surveyed the class.

'I have something to tell you, girls,' she

began, 'that gives me great pleasure on one hand, yet causes me some worry on the other.' Here she shot a glance at Mildred. 'As you know, the Hallowe'en celebrations take place in two weeks' time and it is customary for a display to be presented by this school. This year, our class has been chosen to present the display.'

There were gasps of delight from the girls.

'Of course,' Miss Hardbroom went on, 'it is a great honour, but also a responsibility, as Miss Cackle's Academy has a very high reputation which we don't want to spoil, *do we*? Last year, Form Three produced a play which was highly praised, and I thought that this year we might present a broomstick formation team. You will need a lot of practice, as some of you are not too steady on your broomsticks yet, but I am quite certain

that we could give an interesting and successful performance. Is there anyone who would prefer something different?'

She looked round piercingly at the girls, who all shrank into their seats and would not have dared to disagree, even if they had wanted to.

'Good,' said Miss Hardbroom. 'Then it is settled. We shall present a broomstick formation team. Let us go down to the yard and begin to practise at once. Fetch your broomsticks and be outside in two minutes.' With which words she vanished.

The girls excitedly clattered from the room and rushed along the corridors to fetch their broomsticks, which were kept in their own rooms. The spiral staircase rang with the sound of hob-nailed boots as the girls rushed down to the yard, where they found Miss Hardbroom waiting for them.

'First of all, you'd better take a practice flight,' she said. 'Form an orderly crocodile and go round the school and back.'

Off they all flew in an orderly, but rather wobbly, procession round the school.

'Quite good, girls,' said Miss Hardbroom, as they lined up in front of her. 'You were swaying about rather badly, Mildred, but apart from that, you all did quite well. Now, I have made out a list of the things you will be doing. First, a single line, with each pupil sinking and rising alternately. This should be comparatively easy. Secondly, a flying "V" similar to wild geese in flight. Then, nose-diving the yard, and swooping up just before you reach the ground. That will be the most difficult part of all.' Mildred and Maud exchanged horrified glances. 'And finally you will form a circle in the air, each broomstick touching the next. Any

questions? No? Very well, then, we shall begin the first item immediately. What *was* the first item, Mildred?'

'... er, nose-diving the yard, Miss Hardbroom.'

'Wrong. Ethel, do you remember?'

'We are to form a line, each pupil sinking and rising alternately,' replied Ethel, word-perfect as always.

'Correct,' said Miss Hardbroom, with a frosty glare at Mildred. 'We shall practise all this morning and every morning until the celebrations, and perhaps this after-

noon, if I can persuade Miss Bat to allow you to miss your chanting lesson.'

They worked very hard for the next two weeks. Every spare minute was spent practising and, by the time Hallowe'en arrived, the display was quite a joy to watch. Maud's hat was squashed like a concertina from the time when she had not pulled up from a nose-dive during practice, but apart from that there had been hardly any trouble at all, even from Mildred, who was making a special effort to be good and thoughtful.

The day before Hallowe'en, Miss Hardbroom lined up her class in the yard to give them a few final words of advice.

'I am very pleased with you, girls,' she said, almost pleasantly. 'Now, you will be wearing your best robes tomorrow, so I hope they will be clean and pressed.'

As she said this she caught sight of Mildred's broomstick.

'Mildred, why is there a bundle of sticky-tape in the middle of your broomstick?'

'I'm afraid I broke it in half during the first week of term,' admitted Mildred.

Ethel giggled.

'I see,' said Miss Hardbroom. 'Well, you certainly can't use that one in the display. Ethel, I seem to remember you have a spare one. Perhaps you could lend it to Mildred?'

'Oh, Miss Hardbroom!' cried Ethel. 'It was given to me as a birthday present. I shouldn't want anything to happen to it.'

Miss Hardbroom fixed Ethel with one of her nastiest looks.

'If that is how you feel, Ethel,' she said in icy tones, 'then –'

'Oh, I didn't mean I *won't* lend it, Miss Hardbroom,' Ethel said, meekly. 'I'll go

and fetch it now.' And she ran into the school.

Ethel had never forgotten the time Mildred had turned her into a pig, and as she made her way up the spiral staircase she suddenly thought of a marvellous way of taking her revenge. (Ethel really wasn't a nice person at all.)

'I'll fix you, Mildred Hubble,' she cackled to herself, as she took the broomstick out of her cupboard. 'Now, listen to me, Broom, this is very important . . .'

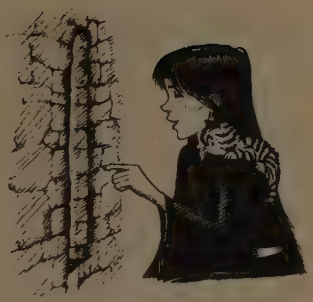
The class had dismissed when Ethel returned carrying the broomstick. Mildred was practising nose-diving the yard.

'Here's the broom, Mildred,' called Ethel. 'I'll leave it propped against the wall.'

'Thanks very much,' replied Mildred, delighted that Ethel was being so nice, for the two hadn't spoken since the pig episode. 'It's very kind of you.'

'Not at all,' said Ethel, smiling wickedly to herself as she went back into the school.

CHAPTER SIX



HALLOWE'EN was celebrated each year in the ruins of an old castle quite near the school. The special fires were lit at sunset, and by dark all the witches and wizards had assembled.

As the sun set, the members of Miss Cackle's Academy were preparing to leave the school. Mildred smoothed her robes, said good-bye to her kitten, put on her hat, grabbed Ethel's broomstick and ran down to the yard. She took a quick look out of her window before leaving the room and saw the fires being lit in the distance. It was very exciting.

The rest of the school had already assembled as Mildred rushed out of the door and took her place. Miss Hardbroom looked splendid in her full witch's robes and hat.

'Everyone is present now,' Miss Hardbroom announced to Miss Cackle.

'Then we shall set off,' said the headmistress. 'To the celebrations! Class Five first, Class Four second, and so on until Class One!'

They made a wonderful sight flying

over the trees towards the castle, cloaks soaring in the wind, and the older girls with their cats perched on the ends of their broomsticks. Miss Hardbroom looked particularly impressive, sitting bolt-upright with her long black hair streaming behind her. The girls had never seen her hair loose before and were amazed how much of it she could possibly scrag into that tight knot every day. It came down to her waist.

'H.B. looks quite nice with her hair like

that,' whispered Maud to Mildred, who was riding next to her.

'Yes,' agreed Mildred, 'she doesn't seem half as frightening.'

Miss Hardbroom turned round and shot a piercing look at the two girls.

'No talking!' she snapped.

A huge crowd was already there at the castle when they arrived. The pupils of the Academy lined up in neat rows while Miss Cackle and all the other teachers shook hands with the chief wizard. He was very old, with a long white beard and a purple gown embroidered with moons and stars.

'And what have you prepared for us this year?' he asked.

'We have prepared a broomstick formation team, Your Honour,' Miss Cackle replied. 'Shall we begin, Miss Hardbroom?'

Miss Hardbroom clapped her hands

and the girls lined up, with Ethel at the front.

'You may begin,' said Miss Hardbroom.

Ethel rose perfectly into the air, followed by the rest of the class. First, they made a line, sinking and rising, which received great applause. Then they nosedived the yard. (Miss Cackle closed her eyes during this part, but nothing went wrong.) Then the girls made a V in the air, which looked quite beautiful.

'Your girls get better every year,' remarked a young witch to Miss Hardbroom, who smiled.

Last of all came the circle, which was quite the easiest part.

'All over soon,' whispered Maud, arranging her broomstick in front of Mildred.

As soon as they had formed the circle, Mildred knew that something was the

matter with her broomstick. It started to rock about, and seemed to be trying to throw her off balance.

'Maud!' she cried to her friend. 'There's something –' but before Mildred could say any more, the broomstick gave a violent kick like a bucking bronco and she fell off, grabbing at Maud as she fell.

There was chaos in the air. All the girls were screaming and clutching at each other, and soon there was a tangled mass of broomsticks and witches on the ground. The only girl who flew serenely back to earth was Ethel. A few of the younger witches laughed, but most of them looked grim.

'We are so sorry, Your Honour,' apologized Miss Cackle, as Miss Hardbroom untangled the heap of girls and jerked them to their feet. 'I'm sure there must be some simple explanation.'

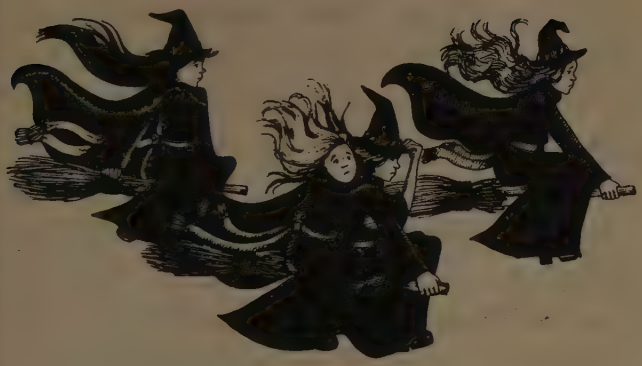
'Miss Cackle,' said the chief magician,

sternly, 'your pupils are the witches of the future. I shudder to think what that future will be like.'

He paused, and there was complete silence. Miss Hardbroom glared at Mildred.

'However,' continued the chief magician, 'we shall forget this incident for the rest of the evening. Let us now begin the chanting.'

CHAPTER SEVEN



AT dawn the celebrations ended, and the pupils flew wearily back to school, some riding double as their own broomsticks were broken. No one was speaking to Mildred (even Maud was being very cool towards her friend), and Form One was in disgrace. When they arrived at the Academy, everyone was sent straight to bed. It was the custom, after the all-night Hallowe'en celebrations, to sleep until noon the next day.

'Mildred!' said Miss Cackle, in a sharp voice, as Form One made their way miserably up the stairs. 'Miss Hardbroom and I will see you in my office first thing tomorrow afternoon.'

'Yes, Miss Cackle,' replied Mildred, almost in tears, and she ran up the steps.

As Mildred opened her bedroom door, Ethel, who was behind her, leaned across and whispered, '*That*'ll teach you to go around changing people into pigs!' and she pulled a face and ran away down the corridor.

Mildred closed the door and fell on to her bed, almost flattening the kitten, which leapt out of the way just in time.

'Oh, Tabby,' she said, burying her face in the kitten's warm fur, 'I've had such a dreadful time, and it wasn't even my fault! I might have known Ethel wouldn't lend me her broomstick out of kindness.

Nobody will ever believe that it wasn't me just being clumsy as usual.'

The kitten licked her ear sympathetically, and the bats returned through the narrow window and settled upside down on the picture-rail.

Two hours later, Mildred was lying in bed, still wide awake. She was imagining what the interview with Miss Cackle and her terrible form-mistress would be like. The kitten was curled up peacefully on her chest.

'It'll be *aw*ful,' she thought, sadly looking towards the grey sky outside the window. 'I wonder if they'll expel me? Or perhaps I could tell them that it was Ethel – no, I would never do that. Suppose they decide to turn me into a frog? No, I'm sure they wouldn't do anything like that; Miss Hardbroom said that was against the Witches' Code. Oh, what *will* they do to me? Even Maud thinks it's my fault, and I've never seen H.B. look more furious.'

She lay thinking about it until she was really frightened, and suddenly she leapt out of bed.

'Come on, Tabby!' she said, pulling a bag out of the wardrobe. 'We're running away.'

She stuffed a few clothes and books into the bag and put on her best robe so that no one would recognize the usual school uniform. Then she picked up her broomstick, put the kitten into the bag, and crept

out along the silent corridor to the spiral staircase.

'I shall miss the bats,' she thought.

It was a cold, dull morning, and Mildred pulled her cape about her shoulders as she crossed the yard, glancing round in case anyone was watching. The school seemed very strange with no one about. Mildred had to fly over the gates, which were locked as usual, but it was difficult to balance with the bag slung on

the back of her broomstick, so she got off on the other side of the gates and started through the pine trees on foot.

'I don't know where we're going, Tabby,' she said, as they picked their way down the mountainside.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT was very gloomy in the forest, and Mildred felt slightly uneasy, surrounded by dark trees which grew so thickly together that no light fell between them. When she was almost at the bottom of the mountain, she sat down to rest, leaning her back against a tree, and the kitten climbed out of the bag to stretch itself on the grass.

It was very quiet except for a few birds singing, and a rather strange noise, a sort of low humming, almost like a lot of people talking at once. In fact, the more Mildred listened, the more it did sound

like voices. She looked in the direction of the noise and thought she saw something moving along the trees.

'Let's go and have a look, Tabby,' she whispered.

They left the bag and broomstick leaning against the tree, and crept through the tangled undergrowth. The noise grew louder.

'Why, it *is* people talking,' said Mildred. 'Look, Tabby, over there, through the branches.'

Sitting in a clearing in the gloom were about twenty witches, all crowded together, muttering and talking in low voices. Mildred crept nearer and listened. She didn't recognize any of them. A tall, grey-haired witch got to her feet.

'Listen, everyone,' said the grey-haired witch. 'Will you all be quiet for a few moments? Thank you. Now, what I should like to know is, are we quite sure

that they will all be sleeping, or at least in their rooms?'

She sat down, and another witch got up to reply. She was a small, plump witch with green horn-rimmed glasses. For a horrible moment Mildred thought it was Miss Cackle, but her voice was different when she spoke.

'Of course we are sure,' this witch replied. 'The morning after Hallowe'en celebrations the entire school sleeps until midday. It is a rule, and the school is very strict about rules, so no one will be up until five minutes to twelve at the very earliest. If we fly over the wall into the back part of the yard, we will be as far away from the bedrooms as we can be, and no one will possibly hear us. Added to this, we shall all be invisible, so we shall be extremely well protected. Then all that remains to be done is to split up, sneak into each room and turn them all into

frogs. They won't be able to see us even if they *are* awake. Remember to take one of these boxes with you for the frogs.' She pointed to a neat pile of small cardboard boxes. 'We can't have even one of them escaping. Once this is done, the entire school and everyone in it will be under our control.

'Is the invisibility potion ready yet?' she continued, turning to a young witch who was stirring a cauldron over a fire. It was the same potion that the two Ms had made during the laughter potion test.

'Another few minutes,' replied the young witch, dropping a handful of bats' whiskers into the mixture. 'It needs to simmer for a bit.'

Mildred was horrified. She sneaked back to where she had left her bag, and then into the shadows so that she couldn't be seen.

'What on earth can we do, Tab?' she

whispered to the kitten, imagining Maud hopping about turned into a frog. 'We can't let them take over the school.'

She rummaged through the bag and took out the two books she had brought with her. One was the Witches' Code and the other was her spell book. Mildred flicked through the spell book and stopped at the page about turning people into animals. There was only one example given, and that was snails.

'Dare I?' thought Mildred. 'Dare I turn the whole lot of them into snails?' The kitten looked at her, encouragingly.

'I know it's against the Witches' Code, Tabby,' she said, 'but *they* don't seem to follow any rules. They were planning to change us into frogs while we were *asleep*, so I don't see why we shouldn't do the same to them in self-defence.'

She sneaked back to the clearing, clutching her spell book.

'Here goes!' she thought desperately.

The invisibility potion was being poured out into cups, so Mildred had to work quickly. She waved her arms in a circle towards the crowd of witches (this part of spell-making can be very awkward when you don't want to draw attention to yourself) and muttered the spell under her breath. For a second, nothing happened, and the witches milling round the cauldron continued to chatter and bustle

about. Mildred closed her eyes in despair, but when she opened them again everyone had vanished and on the ground was a group of snails of all different shapes and sizes.

'Tabby!' shrieked Mildred. 'I've done it! Look!'

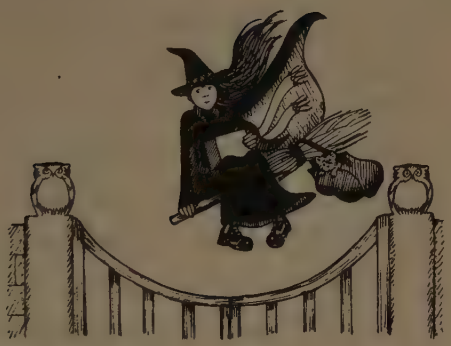
Tabby came bounding out of the undergrowth and stared at the snails, who were all moving away as fast as they could, which wasn't very fast. Mildred took one of the cardboard boxes and put the snails into it, gently picking them up one by one.

'I suppose we'll have to take them back to school and tell Miss Cackle, Tab,' she said, suddenly remembering her interview to come at noon. 'Still, we'll have to go back. We can't just leave this lot here, can we?'

So they set off up the mountainside, Mildred carrying the box in her arms,

while the broomstick flew alongside with the bag hanging from it and Tabby riding inside the bag.

CHAPTER NINE



THE school was still completely deserted when Mildred arrived once more at the heavy iron gates. She hurried up the spiral staircase to her room and unpacked her bag so that no one would know she had tried to run away. Just as she was making her way to the door with the box in her arms, the door opened and Miss Hardbroom appeared.

'Would you kindly tell me what you are doing, Mildred?' she asked frostily. 'I have just watched you creeping up the

corridor, complete with broomstick, cat, a bag and this cardboard box. Is it too much to ask for an explanation?'

'Oh, no, Miss Hardbroom,' replied Mildred, holding up the box for her form-mistress to see the contents. 'You see, I found a crowd of witches on the mountain-side, and they were planning to take over the school and change you all into frogs, and they were making an invisibility potion so you wouldn't be able to see them, so I turned them all into snails and brought . . .'

Her words trailed into silence as she saw the expression on Miss Hardbroom's face. Obviously, her form-mistress didn't believe a word.

'I suppose these are the witches?' she asked bitterly, pointing to the snails which were all huddled up in one corner of the box.

'Yes, they are!' Mildred insisted des-

perately. 'I know it sounds a peculiar story, Miss Hardbroom, but you must believe me. Their broomsticks and cauldrons and things are still in the clearing where I found them, really.'

'Well, you had better show the creatures to Miss Cackle,' said Miss Hardbroom, nastily. 'Go and wait in Miss Cackle's office while I fetch her – and I hope this isn't any sort of joke, Mildred. I seem to remember that you are already in a considerable amount of trouble.'

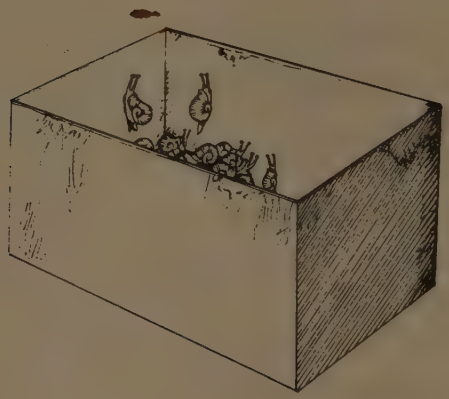
Mildred was perched nervously on the edge of a chair in the headmistress's office when Miss Hardbroom returned with Miss Cackle, who was wearing a grey dressing-gown, and looked half asleep.

'*These* are they,' stated Miss Hardbroom, pointing to the box on the desk.

Miss Cackle sat down heavily in her chair and looked first into the box and then at Mildred.

'Mildred,' she said in dramatic tones, 'I am still suffering from my public humiliation last night. Because of you the reputation of this school now lies in the mud, and yet you expect me to believe an incredible story like this?'

'But it's *true*!' cried Mildred. 'I can even describe some of them. One was tall and thin with thick grey hair, and there was another who looked just like you, Miss Cackle, if you'll excuse me being personal.



She had green horn-rimmed glasses –'

'Wait a moment!' said Miss Cackle, pushing her own glasses on to her nose. 'Did you say she had horn-rimmed glasses and looked like me?'

'Yes, Miss Cackle,' replied Mildred, blushing. 'Green ones. I'm sorry if you thought I was being rude.'

'No, no, child, it isn't that,' said Miss Cackle, peering into the box again. Then she turned to Miss Hardbroom. 'Do you know, I think the girl may be right after all. The person whom she described sounds exactly like my wicked sister Agatha who has always been extremely jealous of my position at this Academy!'

Miss Cackle stared over her glasses at the snails.

'Well, well, Agatha,' she chuckled. 'So we meet again. I wonder which of these beauties you are? What shall we do with them, Miss Hardbroom?'

'I suggest we change them back to their natural form again.'

'But we can't!' cried Miss Cackle in dismay. 'There are *twenty* of them.'

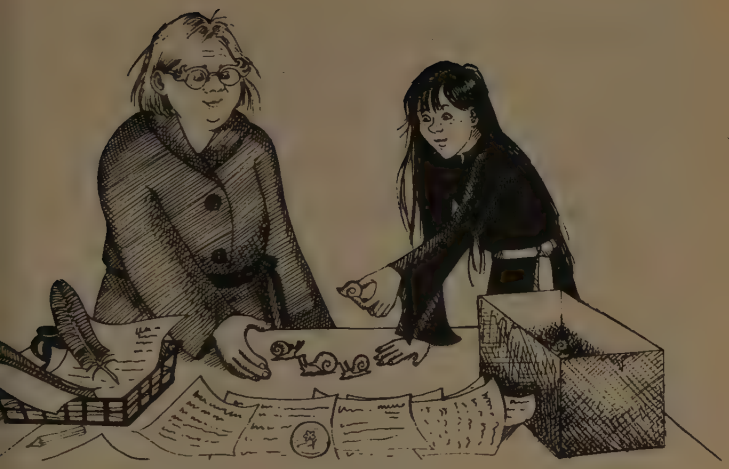
Miss Hardbroom looked faintly amused.

'May I point out,' she said, 'paragraph five of rule number seven in the Witches' Code, which states that anyone having been changed into any type of animal by another witch, for purposes of self-defence, cannot, on being changed back again, practise any form of magic against their captor. In other words, they must admit defeat.'

Miss Cackle looked embarrassed.

'Oh, yes!' she said brightly. 'I remember now. It slipped my mind for the moment. Did you hear that, Agatha? Do you think they can hear us, Miss Hardbroom?'

'Most certainly,' replied Miss Hard-



broom. 'Perhaps you could line them up on your desk, and ask your sister to step forward?'

'What a splendid idea,' said Miss Cackle, who was beginning to enjoy herself. 'Help me, Mildred, my dear.'

They lined the snails up on the desk and Miss Cackle asked Agatha to step forward. One snail shuffled rather reluctantly out of line.

'Listen, Agatha,' said Miss Cackle.

'You must admit that you don't really have much choice. If you will agree to abide by the Witches' Code, then we can change you back, but not otherwise. If you agree, go back into line so that we know what you want us to do.'

The snail shuffled back into line again.

Miss Hardbroom spoke the words of the spell which released them, and suddenly the room was full of witches, all looking furious and talking angrily at the same time. The noise was terrible.

'Will you be quiet at once!' commanded Miss Cackle.

She turned to Mildred who was still perched on her chair. 'You may go back to bed, Mildred, and in view of what you have done for the school this morning, I think we will have to forget about the interview you were to have had with Miss Hardbroom and myself this afternoon. Don't you agree, Miss Hardbroom?'

Miss Hardbroom raised one eyebrow and Mildred's heart sank.

'Before I agree, Miss Cackle, if you'll forgive me,' she said, 'I would just like to ask Mildred what she was doing wandering about on the mountain when she should have been in bed?'

'I – I was out for a walk, Miss Hardbroom,' replied Mildred.

'And you just happened to have your spell book with you.'

'Yes,' agreed Mildred, unhappily.

'Such devotion to the school!' said Miss Hardbroom, smiling in a most unpleasant way. 'Taking your spell book with you wherever you go. I expect you were also singing the school song as you rambled along, weren't you, my dear?'

Mildred looked at the floor. She could feel all the other witches staring at her.

'I think we must let the child go to bed,'

said Miss Cackle. 'Run along now, Mildred.'

Mildred shot out of the room before her form-mistress could say anything else, and was in bed in five seconds!

CHAPTER TEN

AT noon the rising bell clanged through the corridors but Mildred pulled the pillow over her head and went back to sleep. It wasn't long before the door of her room burst open.

'Wake up, Mildred!' shrieked Maud, seizing the pillow and hitting her friend over the head with it.

Mildred screwed up her eyes against the daylight and saw what seemed to be hundreds of people around the bed all talking and shouting. Maud was actually

on the bed, bouncing up and down.

'What's the matter?' asked Mildred, sleepily.

'As if you didn't know!' replied Maud, breathless from bouncing. 'The whole school's talking about it.'

'About what?' said Mildred, who was still half-asleep.

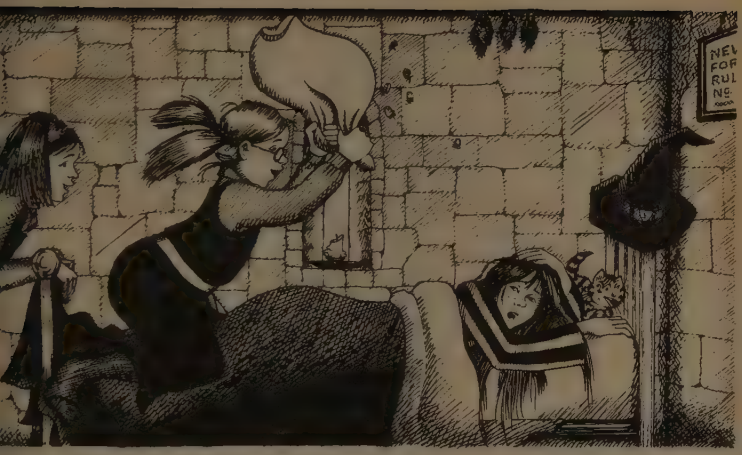
'*Will* you wake up?' shrieked Maud, pulling the bedclothes back. 'You saved the whole school from Miss Cackle's wicked sister, that's all!'

Mildred sat bolt upright.

'So I did!' she exclaimed, and everyone laughed.

'Miss Cackle's called a meeting in the Great Hall,' said Dawn and Gloria, two other members of Form One. 'You'd better hurry and dress, she'll expect you to be there.'

Mildred jumped out of bed and her friends went off to the hall. She was soon



ready and ran to join them, shoelaces trailing along the floor as usual.

Maud had saved a place for her, and Mildred was embarrassed to notice that everyone stared as she came into the hall. While they waited for the teachers to arrive, Mildred decided to tell her friend about Ethel.

'Listen,' she whispered, leaning towards Maud so that no one could hear. 'It wasn't my fault about the display.

Ethel cast a spell on the broomstick that she lent me, and I know because she told me. Don't tell anyone else, will you? But I wanted you to know because I don't want you thinking that I was just being clumsy.'

'But everyone already knows,' said Maud.

'Do they?' exclaimed Mildred. 'Who told them?'

'Well, you know what Ethel's like,' replied Maud. 'She just had to tell someone how clever she'd been so she told Harriet, and Harriet thought it was a dreadful thing to do so *she* told everyone else. No one's talking to Ethel now and Miss Hardbroom found out too and was furious with her.'

'Shhhhh!' said someone. 'They're coming.'

Everyone stood up as Miss Cackle came

in, followed by Miss Hardbroom and all the other teachers.

'You may sit down, girls,' said the headmistress. 'As you all know, the school narrowly escaped invasion this morning. Had it not been for a certain young member of the school we should not be here but would be hopping about turned into frogs.'

The girls laughed.

'No, no, girls! Do not laugh! It would not be at all funny had it happened. However, as it did *not* happen, I proclaim the rest of today a half holiday in honour of Mildred Hubble. Mildred, would you come up here for a moment?'

Mildred went bright red and was pushed to her feet. She stumbled through the rows of chairs, tripping over feet as she went, and clumped across the platform to Miss Cackle's table.

'Now don't be shy, my dear,' said Miss Cackle beaming. She turned to the school. 'Come along, school! Three cheers for our heroine Mildred.'

Mildred blushed and twisted her fingers behind her back as the cheers rang out.

It was a relief to 'the heroine' when it was all over. As they filed out of the hall, she was thumped on the back and congratulated by everyone – except for Ethel

who gave Mildred the nastiest look you've ever seen.

'Good old Mil!' yelled someone.

'We'll get out of our chanting test, thanks to you,' said someone else.

'Thanks for the holiday!'

'Thanks, Mil!' And so on.

Maud flung an arm around her friend.

'You did look embarrassed,' she said. 'You went ever so red, I could see you from the back of the hall!'

'Oh, *don't*,' said Mildred. 'Let's go and fetch the kittens and make the most of our holiday.'

'One moment,' said a chilling voice that they knew so well. The two girls turned to find their form-mistress standing behind them. They jumped to attention at once, wondering what they had done which was a natural reaction whenever Miss Hardbroom spoke.

This time, however, to their amaze-

ment, she smiled, a friendly smile not like the usual curl at the corner of the lips.

'I just wanted to say thank you, Mildred,' she said. 'Run along now, girls, and enjoy your holiday before it's over.'

She smiled again and vanished.

The girls just stared at each other.

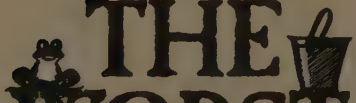
'Sometimes,' said Mildred, 'I think she probably isn't as mean as we think she is.'

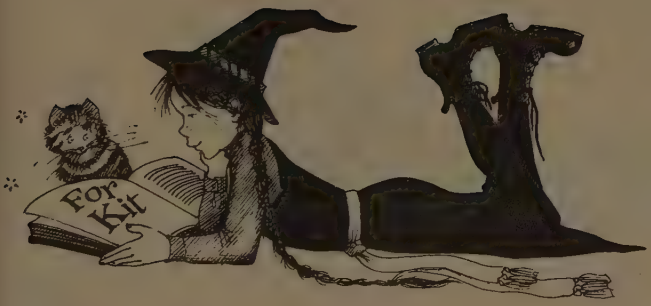
'Perhaps you are right, Mildred,' said

Miss Hardbroom's voice from behind Mildred's ear, and the two girls jumped in horror!

Mildred grabbed her friend's hand and they hurried away down the corridor out into the misty playground leaving Miss Hardbroom's laughter echoing from nowhere along the empty passage.

A BAD SPELL FOR THE WORST WITCH

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CHAPTER ONE

It was the very first day of Mildred Hubble's second year at Miss Cackle's Academy for Witches.

The school year at the academy was divided into two long terms, the first of these commencing in September and stretching right to the end of January. This was known as the Winter Term and was followed by a month of welcome holiday. The second session began in

March and finished at the end of July, and this was called the Summer Term, though in fact it was still extremely cold and wintry when term began. Then there was another glorious month of holiday until the beginning of September, and the start of another year.

After her disastrous first year at the academy, it was something of a miracle that Mildred was returning there at all. She was one of those unfortunate people who seem to invite disaster wherever they go. Despite her efforts to be helpful and well-behaved, Mildred had an uncanny knack of appearing to be the cause of any trouble which was occurring, and it must be admitted that there *were* occasions (particularly when her rather wild imagination ran away with her) when she managed to turn some peaceful event into a scene of total chaos.

However, *this* year Mildred was older and hopefully wiser (at any rate she was

more full of good intentions than ever) and she was quite determined to lose her reputation as the worst witch in the school.

Arriving on her broomstick at the prison-like school gates, Mildred peered through the railings into the misty playground. For once she was early and there were only a handful of girls in the yard, all stamping their feet and huddling in their cloaks to keep out the bitter cold. It was always chilly at the school because the building was made of stone, rather like a castle, and was perched on the topmost peak of a mountain, surrounded by

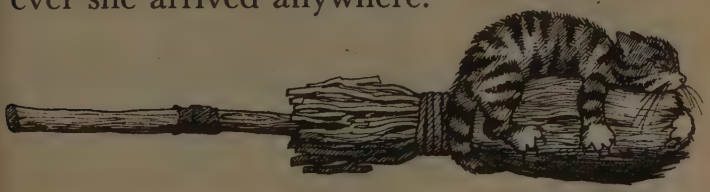
pine trees which grew so close together that it was very damp and gloomy. In fact, the girls suffered permanently from colds and flu from all the time they were forced to spend in the freezing playground.

'Healthy fresh air!' Miss Drill, the gym mistress, would bark, herding the sneezing, coughing pupils outside. 'It'll do you all a power of good. Five hundred lines to anyone caught sneaking in before the bell!'

Mildred flew over the gates and landed expertly on the other side.

'Well, *that's* a good start!' she thought, looking around in the hope that someone had witnessed so successful a landing, but of course they hadn't. People were only ever watching when she did something dreadful, never at a moment of triumph.

Mildred took her suitcase from the back of the broomstick which was hovering politely, waiting for the next command. Then she turned her attention to the tabby cat still spreadeagled on the back of the broom with its eyes screwed tightly shut and its claws gripping on for dear life. The poor little cat had never got over its terror of flying, and Mildred always had to prise it from the broomstick whenever she arrived anywhere.



'Trust *me* to get a cat like you,' said Mildred fondly, stroking it with one hand and unclasping its claws with the other. 'Come on, silly, we're here. Look! It's all over, you can jump off now.'

The cat opened one eye cautiously, saw that it was true and sprang onto Mildred's shoulder where it rubbed its head gratefully against her hair. Mildred felt a wave of tenderness towards the scrawny creature.

'Mildred! Millie! It's *me*!' shrieked a familiar voice from above. Mildred looked up and saw Maud swooping over the gates, waving her hat in the air. This last action nearly caused her to fall off and she lurched to a rather drunken halt at Mildred's feet.

'Oh, Maud!' laughed Mildred, full of joy at the sight of her best friend after the long summer holiday. 'Gosh, you look a lot thinner, and your hair's got longer.'

'I know,' said Maud, stroking her hair

which was in two stubby plaits instead of her usual bunches. 'Mother put me on this *awful* diet. I wasn't allowed to eat *anything* except lettuce and celery and dreadful stuff like that. Still, I'm out of her clutches now, so it's back to good old school dinners. Three cheers for date-pudding and custard I say!' They both laughed.

'I don't know why they bother to *have* gates at this school,' remarked Mildred, as another three pupils soared over the wall on their brooms.

'Perhaps it's in case we have some ordinary visitors,' said Maud. 'You know, people who don't have brooms. Miss Cackle couldn't expect ordinary guests to bring ladders with them, could she? Who else has arrived, by the way? Anyone *we* know?'

'Only Ethel,' replied Mildred. 'She pretended not to see me though, not that I *care* of course.'

Ethel Hallow was the form sneak and goody-goody, and it was hardly surprising that Mildred felt unfriendly towards her after all the mean tricks Ethel had played during their first two terms, including almost getting Mildred expelled on two occasions.

'Oh look Maud!' said Mildred, indicating two small girls in brand-new hats and huge cloaks which nearly touched their brand-new shining boots. 'They must be first-years, look at them. Don't they look *little*?'

'To think *we* were like that,' said Maud in a motherly way. 'It makes me feel quite old.'

The two first-years were standing close together, looking lost and shy. One of them was glancing nervously around, and the other was trying unsuccessfully to stop crying. They were a sorry-looking pair. Both were thin; the weeping one had a pinched, pale face and wispy mouse-coloured hair, and the other one had brilliant orange frizzy bunches. For some

reason, the weeping one reminded Mildred very strongly of someone else, though she couldn't think who it was.

'Let's go and cheer them up, shall we?' suggested Mildred. 'They can't help being new, poor things. Remember how awful *we* felt?'

Feeling very grown-up and wise, Maud and Mildred sauntered casually over to the two pathetic little girls.

'Hello,' said Mildred, 'you must be new.'

'Yes,' chorused the girls.

Mildred patted the snivelling one awkwardly on the shoulder. 'Don't cry,' she said stiffly. 'It isn't *that* bad you know.' Unfortunately, Mildred's kindly gesture only served to make matters worse, instead of better, for the girl burst into deafening sobs and flung her arms round Mildred's waist.

Mildred was appalled. Everyone in the playground was staring at her, and any

minute now Miss Hardbroom (Mildred's terrifying form-mistress from the previous year) was bound to appear and accuse her of upsetting a poor new girl.

Maud detached the girl rather roughly and gave her a shake. 'Stop that silly noise at once!' she said crossly. 'You'll get Mildred into trouble before the first bell's even rung.'

Mildred smoothed her cloak. 'What's your name?' she asked.

'Sybil,' snuffled the girl.

'Mine's Clarice,' volunteered the other one.

'Are the teachers strict here?' asked Sybil, wiping her eyes with a corner of her voluminous cloak.

'Not really,' replied Maud.

'Well, Miss Hardbroom is,' said Mildred. 'In fact she's the worst of the lot, and she'll be *your* form-mistress. We're lucky this year because we'll get Miss Gimlett, and she's quite nice. But Miss

Hardbroom's horrendous. She just *appears* out of thin air –' At this point Mildred broke off and looked around in case she had done just that, but she hadn't.

'– *And* she says dreadful things to you in front of the whole class and makes you feel really stupid,' continued Maud.

'That's right,' said Mildred, 'and *I* heard tell that she changed *one* girl into a frog because she was two seconds late for a lesson. I don't know if it's true, but there *is* a frog sometimes seen near the pond in the backyard, and I've heard that it's *really* a poor first-year who –'

'I've never heard that before!' gasped Maud. '*Is* it true?'

'I *think* so,' answered Mildred, though in fact she had made up the tale on the spur of the moment and it had somehow got rather out of hand. To be honest, Mildred's stories often got rather out of hand, when she would find, to her dismay, that the whole class was listening and believing every word. She just *couldn't* say then that she'd made it all up.

Poor Sybil believed every word of Mildred's story about the frog and she burst into renewed and even noisier sobs, so deafening that Maud and Mildred thought it best to scurry away, leaving Clarice to offer comfort.

'Mildred! Maudie! Yoo hoo! It's *me*!'

Enid Nightshade, the new girl who arrived last term and was now their friend, came zooming over the treetops and screeched to a halt so forcefully that her cat and suitcase shot off the back, and

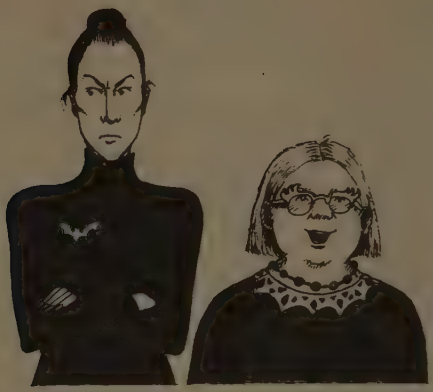
Maud and Mildred had to leap out of the way to avoid being run over.

At that moment the bell rang and the three witches picked up all their belongings and struggled inside with them.

'Thank goodness we haven't got H.B. any more,' whispered Enid. (H.B. was their nickname for Miss Hardbroom.)

'Yes,' agreed Mildred, 'this year should be as easy as pie without *her* breathing down our necks.'

CHAPTER TWO



The first announcement made by Miss Cackle at assembly was the ghastly news that Miss Hardbroom had changed places with Miss Gimlett, and would now be accompanying her old form into their second year. An audible groan rippled through the new Form Two, quelled at once by one of Miss Hardbroom's piercing glances which always made each pupil feel that they had been noticed personally.

With a sinking heart, Mildred moved miserably through all the chores of the first day, unpacking robes, arranging the new books in her desk, feeding the cat, and innumerable small tasks till at last it was bedtime.

The pupils were too depressed to bother sneaking into each other's rooms for a chat as they usually did on the first night back at school. Mildred lay in a glum heap under the blankets with the cat purring like a lawn-mower on her pillow, trying to think if there was any possible advantage in another year with Miss Hardbroom at the helm, but there wasn't.

Next morning, Mildred was jolted awake by the bell ringing in a much more frantic way than usual. It didn't take long for the cobwebs of sleep to clear and for her to realize that it was the fire-bell.

An untidily dressed Maud flung open Mildred's door as she rushed past. 'Quick,

Mil!' she shrieked. 'It's fire-drill, come on!'

'What a time to choose,' said Mildred, bundling on her tunic over her pyjamas. 'Perhaps it's a real fire?'

Maud went rushing off down the corridor, but Mildred stopped and looked out of the window to see if there was any evidence of fire. There, in the yard below, was Miss Hardbroom wreathed in thick purple smoke. She appeared to be standing in her customary arms-folded, upright posture, staring into the smoke as if she was in a trance, which seemed decidedly odd, given the circumstances.

'Crumbs!' thought Mildred. 'She's gone into a state of shock. I'll have to help!'

Mildred rushed to the washroom and seized the bucket which stood under the window there to catch drips from the leak in the ceiling. It was already half full with stagnant rain water, so Mildred filled it

to the brim, then carried it back to the yard window-sill, collecting her broomstick on the way.

She peered out of the window again, hoping that she might perhaps have imagined the scene below, but Miss Hardbroom had not moved and was now almost hidden from view by the smoke.

'Here goes!' said Mildred, her spirits rising as she thought how grateful her form-mistress would be. 'Perhaps I'll get a medal for bravery.'

It is difficult, at the best of times, to balance on a broomstick, but when you are trying to carry a heavy bucket of water at the same time, it is virtually impossible. Mildred did her best to arrange the bucket hanging from the back, but it was obviously going to spill the minute they took off, so she put the bucket back onto the window-sill, climbed onto the broom first, and then settled the bucket in her lap. This seemed

to be reasonably steady so, taking her courage in both hands, Mildred gave the word: 'Down broom! Fast!'

Instantly they plunged into a vertical nose-dive so abrupt that the bucket flew from her grasp and dropped like a stone. Mildred swooped desperately after it but, alas, too late. A torrent of foul, icy water

drenched Miss Hardbroom from head to toe, followed a second later by the bucket which crashed over her head with a doom-laden clang. To give the stern form-mistress some credit, it must be recorded that she did not flinch when the metal bucket struck, after falling from such a height.

Though her natural inclination was to turn round and zoom straight back again, Mildred could see that there was no escape. The smoke had cleared, revealing at least half the school lined up in rows and Miss Hardbroom still in the same position, with the bucket neatly over her head. For a mad moment, Mildred thought that perhaps, for some unknown reason, it was only a statue of Miss Hardbroom, but this illusion was shattered when the statue spoke.

'There is no need to ask *which* pupil is responsible for this,' came the familiar voice from inside the bucket. 'Mildred Hubble, perhaps you would be kind enough to assist me in my predicament?'

The sight of any other teacher dripping with water and with a bucket over her head would have been an occasion for great mirth among the pupils, but absolutely nothing could diminish Miss Hardbroom's power. Not a sound was heard,

not a smirk flickered on any face as Mildred stepped forward and stood on tiptoe to remove the bucket.

Miss Hardbroom's eyes bored into Mildred like a laser-beam the moment they came into view.

'Thank you, Mildred,' she said acidly.

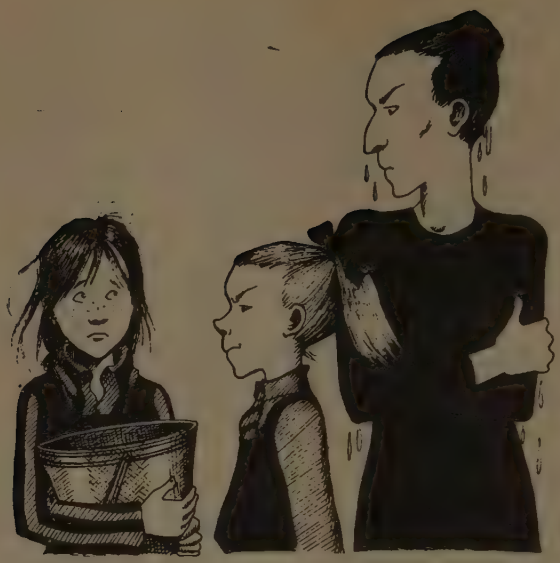
'I – I'm s-sorry, M-M-Miss Hardb-b-broom,' gibbered Mildred, 'it was – I thought you were on fire – there was smoke so I, well I thought – it seemed . . .'

'Mildred,' said Miss Hardbroom heavily, 'does it seem likely to you that I would be standing here in the middle of a raging inferno, casually rounding up all you girls?'

'There was the smoke, Miss Hardbroom,' explained Mildred in a tiny voice, suddenly feeling aware of the striped pyjama legs under her tunic.

'*If* you remember your fire-drill Mildred,' said Miss Hardbroom, 'pupils are expected in the yard through the main door, and *not*, as some girls seem to imagine, from the upstairs windows. On entering the yard through the *correct* entrance, they would have been met by me, who would then have informed them that the smoke was merely magic smoke to lend atmosphere to the proceedings and that there was no cause for total panic as some pupils would seem to be prone to.'

'Yes, Miss Hardbroom,' quavered Mildred, 'I'm sorry, Miss Hardbroom.'



'Get into line, Mildred,' ordered Miss Hardbroom. 'Let us just say that we expect this to be your only half-witted jape for the entire term. Ethel? Would you please fetch me a towel and my cloak before I turn into an iceberg?'

'Of course, Miss Hardbroom,' said Ethel, smiling demurely at her form-mistress, but pulling a horrid face at Mildred as she passed her by.

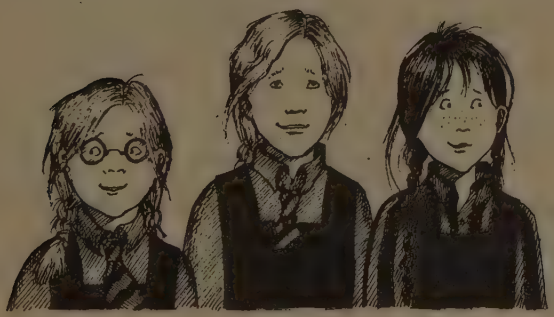
Mildred lined up next to her two friends, Maud and Enid.

'You are the limit, Mildred,' whispered Maud.

'I *know*,' said Mildred miserably. 'I must have been still asleep or something.'

'Actually,' said Enid, 'it was quite funny really.'

At this point all three friends felt an unruly wave of amusement sweeping over them, and the rest of the fire-drill was spent desperately avoiding each other's eyes in case a fit of the giggles should descend, and they were all agreed (especially Mildred) that this would definitely *not* be the thing to do.



CHAPTER THREE

Fire-drill was followed immediately by breakfast in the dining-hall and everyone was surprised to see Ethel deliberately sitting down next to Mildred, for it was common knowledge that the two were not on the best of terms.

'You haven't changed, I see,' remarked Ethel provokingly.

Mildred ignored this jibe and sprinkled sugar over her bowl of porridge which resembled a drought-stricken river-bed.

'Actually,' continued Ethel, 'I've got a bone to pick with you, Mildred Hubble.'

'Oh?' said Mildred. 'What?'

'It's about terrorizing my little sister,' replied Ethel.

'I don't even *know* your little sister!' exclaimed Mildred.

'Really?' said Ethel. 'Are you sure you don't remember telling a poor little girl named Sybil some stupid story about being turned into a frog?'

'Gosh, was that your sister?' asked Mildred.

'Yes, it *was*, as a matter of fact,' replied Ethel.

'I don't know why we didn't notice, Mil,' said Maud, rallying to her friend's side. 'We should have noticed that spiky nose anywhere.'

Ethel turned deep mauve with rage.

'Oh, come *on*, Ethel,' said Mildred, trying to make peace. 'It *was* only a made-up story. She *was* being a bit of a weed

and in any case I went to cheer her up in the first place.'

'A fine way to cheer people up!' retorted Ethel. 'Terrifying the wits out of them. Sybil still hasn't got over the shock – and don't you go insulting my family. Sybil's delicate, not a weed.'

'*Look*, Ethel,' said Mildred firmly, 'just stop it, will you? I'm not getting into a fight over some silly little first-year whether she's your sister or not, and if you'll excuse me, this porridge is bad enough hot, but cold it's inedible and there's a long way to go till lunchtime.'

'I won't forget this,' muttered Ethel. 'No one insults *my* family and gets away with it.'

'Weed!' exclaimed Mildred, feeling suddenly reckless after all Ethel's prodding. 'All you Hallows are weeds, weeds, weeds!'

Ethel got up and flounced out of the hall, looking grim.

'You shouldn't goad her,' said Enid. 'You know what she's like.'

'I know,' said Mildred, 'but she does ask for it sometimes with all her airs and graces. No one insults *my* family,' she mimicked in Ethel's voice. 'She's just an old windbag, she'll have forgotten by tomorrow.'

'I wouldn't be too sure about *that*,' warned Maud.

After breakfast Miss Hardbroom announced that the rest of the morning would be devoted to cat-training. All the girls were presented with black kittens in their first term at the academy and these were trained to ride on the back of their broomsticks. Mildred, however, had been given a rather dim-witted tabby because there hadn't been quite enough black ones to go round. It seemed rather typical of her luck that she had ended up with the wrong sort of cat, and she couldn't help wondering if Miss Hardbroom had made sure that the misfit kitten had been given to Mildred, rather than someone like Ethel.

'I hope you have all been practising during the holiday,' said Miss Hardbroom, as the girls all lined up with their brooms hovering next to them and the cats perched on the back – that is to say, *most* of the cats were perched on the back. Mildred's tabby was clinging desperately

to the front of her cardigan, its claws hooked in and a wild, desperate look on its face.

'The cat is supposed to be *on* the broomstick, Mildred,' said Miss Hardbroom wearily.

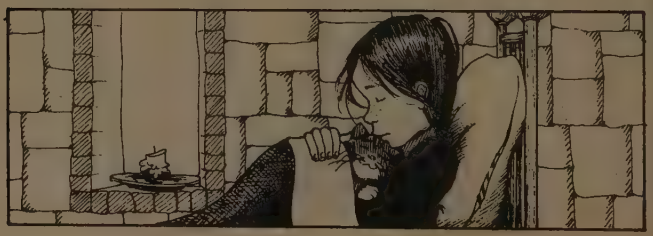
'Yes, Miss Hardbroom,' agreed Mildred, dragging the cat from her front and reducing the cardigan to shreds at the same time. The desperate creature

immediately spread itself flat on the back of the broom with its eyes glued shut as if awaiting execution.

'How many terms have you been training that cat, Mildred?' said Miss Hardbroom. 'Look at the other cats. None of *them* seem to be finding it so terribly difficult to just *sit* on their brooms. It is not as though they were being asked to do an aerobatic display, Mildred. Now take that cat to your room and work with it there for the rest of the morning. The creature is not fit to be seen until it is properly trained. It is a disgrace to the academy.'

'Yes, Miss Hardbroom,' said Mildred, now faced with the embarrassing task of prising the unfortunate cat from the broomstick and making her way miserably from the yard with the taunting stare of Ethel boring into her back.

Inside her room, Mildred decided to get into bed for a few minutes to warm up. It was a freezing cold day and her feet were like blocks of ice after the session in the yard. The cat, delighted that its ordeal was over, burrowed under the covers like a furry hot-water bottle, and although Mildred had only meant to sit and get warm, within a few minutes her eyelids began to droop, and before long she was fast asleep – *so* fast asleep that she did not hear the door opening very quietly.



CHAPTER FOUR

The noise of the bedroom door being slammed woke Mildred with a start. She opened her eyes and froze with horror and disbelief at the sight of a vast creature staring down at her with green eyes each as big as a lilypond.

Mildred closed her eyes again, hoping that perhaps it was only a nightmare, but when she sneaked another look, the apparition was still there, and now it began patting gently at Mildred with its gigantic paws.

Terrified, Mildred backed away and crashed into something hard, which seemed to be a huge iron railing towering above her. However, at this distance from

the monster, she could see that it was none other than her own tabby cat, which for some reason had grown to the size of a mammoth.

Knowing the cat as well as she did, Mildred could see that, despite its size, it was frightened out of its wits. Her suspicions flew at once to Ethel having cast a spell on the cat to get even with Mildred for the insult to Ethel's family.

'Don't be scared, Tab,' she started to say, but much to her surprise, all that came out was a strange hoarse noise sounding rather like 'Craark!'

Panic began to grip Mildred as it slowly dawned on her that not only Tabby, but also the bedstead, all the furniture and even the bats sleeping round the picture rail were many times larger than usual. This led her to the alarming conclusion that it was not *they* who were bigger, but *she* who was smaller – and a *lot* smaller.

She peered over the edge of the bedstead and saw a cliff of bedcover stretching endlessly to the stone floor. Tabby began purring which sounded, to the miniature Mildred, like a squadron of aeroplanes taking off.

'Oh, do stop it, Tab. I can't hear myself think!' she tried to say, but once again the words seemed to stick in her throat and come out as a croak.

Mildred decided to get to the chest of drawers, on which stood a small mirror, so that she could see just how small she was. The end of the bedstead was only a few inches away from the drawers, but in her new tiny condition it appeared to be miles. However, to her great surprise, she suddenly felt the impulse to take a flying leap at the huge gap, and landed with the ease of an acrobat on top of the chest.

'How strange,' thought Mildred, 'I had no idea that I could jump like that!'

She soon discovered why, and it was

not a pleasant discovery. Looking back at her from the mirror, with eyes like saucers, was a small, olive-green frog. Mildred turned round, but there was no one behind her. She stretched out her hand and saw a green, damp limb reach out to touch the mirror-frog's webbed foot.

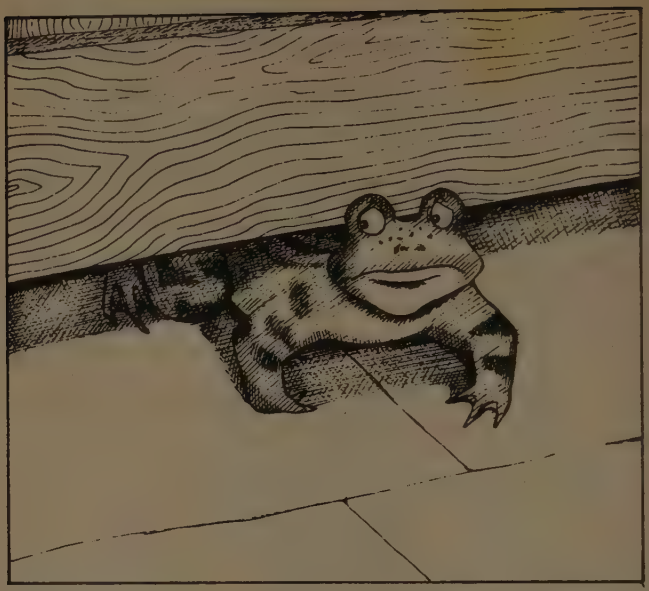
Mildred began to cry, and as she lifted her hand to wipe away the tears she watched with horrified fascination as the reflection did the same.

'This is no use at all,' Mildred said to herself sternly. 'Sitting here crying isn't going to change anything. I must get help.'

She jumped back onto the bed and noticed something lying on the pillow. It was a giant-sized clump of weeds, Ethel's way of telling Mildred who had cast the spell and why.

Mildred leapt to the floor and sat there for a moment, reflecting how nice it was to be able to jump such an amazing distance without getting hurt. It reminded her of the disastrous pole-vault on the school sports-day, when Enid had cast a spell on Mildred's pole to help her, but had inadvertently overdone the magic and Mildred had sailed through Miss Hardbroom's study window.

However, the ability to jump was the *only* pleasant aspect of Mildred's new condition and a sudden, hot wave of panic seized her. She felt utterly trapped in her small, cramped frog's body, her knees felt bent in the wrong place and her arms were too short, and it was quite terrifying trying to speak and only being capable of a hoarse croaking sound. There was a large gap beneath Mildred's door, and she decided to set off and find someone to help her. Watched by her baffled cat, Mildred squeezed through the

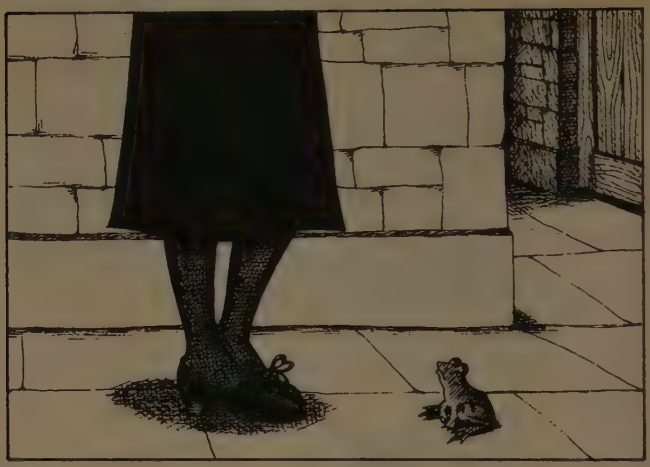


gap and hopped away down the corridor, convinced that *nothing* could be worse than just sitting helplessly in her room.

As it turned out, she would have done better to have stayed on her pillow, for there she might have been found by Maud or Enid who would possibly have put two and two together at the curious sight of a cat and frog nestling on the same bed. But outside her room, Mildred

was just a common frog who had strayed into the school, where it would be unlikely to occur to anyone (except the wicked person who had done the deed) that it might be a second-year witch under an enchantment.

CHAPTER FIVE



With the worst possible timing, Mildred turned the corner just as Miss Hardbroom strode through the door leading from the yard.

'Well, well,' she said, bending down and picking up the little frog, 'what have we here then?' And without further ado, she crammed Mildred into her pocket and marched off.

It was not very pleasant in the pocket. Mildred felt around in the bumping, musty darkness and discovered a whistle, a notebook with a rubber band round it, and a voluminous handkerchief.

The next thing she knew, Miss Hardbroom had pulled her out of the pocket and plonked her unceremoniously into a high-sided glass jar. Through the glass she saw that she was on a shelf in the potion laboratory and the tall figure of her formmistress was swirling out of the door.

Mildred felt absolutely dreadful. There appeared to be no way of escaping and even if she *did* escape, she had no idea what to do. She wondered if Ethel would relent and change her back, or whether she might be really wicked enough to leave her as a frog, for ever. She also wondered if Miss Hardbroom and the class would begin to wonder where she was, after a while.

They were wondering where she was

at that very moment. Miss Hardbroom had, in fact, been on her way to Mildred's room when she encountered the frog. After leaving the potion laboratory, she soon discovered that Mildred was not in her room and set off to look all over the school where, of course, she did not find the missing pupil. The class when questioned did not know where Mildred was either. It was a mystery.

'Perhaps she's run away?' suggested Enid to Maud as the girls trooped in for dinner. 'H.B. *was* cross with her about the cat.'

'I don't think so,' said Maud. 'She would have taken the cat with her if she'd done that.'

'Well, I can't think *where* she is then,' shrugged Enid.

'Nor can I,' said Maud. 'But if you ask *me*, Ethel's got something to do with it. She's got that *look* on. You know, that *I* know something *you* don't sort of look.'

'We'd better keep an eye on her then,' said Enid.

Meanwhile, in the potion laboratory, Mildred was desperately trying to overbalance the jar by climbing up the side and leaning on it. However, she could

only get up a little way before she tumbled backwards, as the jar had a heavy glass base which proved impossible to overbalance. After several tries she gave up and wept a pool of panicky, frustrated tears. All she could do now was to rely on Ethel being merciful (which was not one of Ethel's main qualities). Also, Mildred realized that even if Ethel *was* feeling merciful enough to confess, it was quite possible that no one would realize that Mildred was actually the frog in the jar.

Form Two filed into the potion laboratory after dinner for an hour of spell-making. Maud and Enid were still racking their brains as to the whereabouts of their friend, and Mildred felt utterly helpless as they passed by her jar and she heard Maud say, 'Perhaps she *has* run away, Enid. I mean, I can't think where else she's gone and she knows she'll get into the most dreadful trouble if she turns up now without a good excuse.'

'I'm *here*!' Mildred tried to shriek, but it only came out as a frenzied croaking.

'That is the noisiest frog I've ever had in this laboratory,' snapped Miss Hardbroom with a piercing glance at the jar. Mildred lapsed into silence and fixed her eyes on Maud in the hope that she might be able to send some sort of message through the air – like a radio wave – to her friend. It almost succeeded.

'Enid,' said Maud, as they sorted through the ingredients for an invisibility potion, 'I'm sure that frog's staring at me. It hasn't taken its eyes off our table for the last ten minutes.'

'Don't be silly,' said Enid, 'frogs don't stare at people.'

'Well, that one does,' said Maud. 'Look!'

Enid looked. The little frog was definitely gazing hard in Maud's direction, and when it saw Enid turn to look, it began jumping up and down and croaking like a mad thing.

'Maud,' said Miss Hardbroom, 'would you please remove that frog from the jar and put it into the box in the cupboard? We do not wish to listen to *that* noise all afternoon.'

'CRAARK!' pleaded Mildred, 'CRAARK! CRAAARK! CRAAAARK!' Maud approached the shelf cautiously, reached into the jar, and took Mildred out.

Mildred gave one last, long look into Maud's eyes, but she could see that there was no hope of Maud recognizing a half-mad frog as her best friend. There was nothing for it but to flee.

Mildred leapt into the air as high as her new, powerful legs would take her, and landed with a soft 'splat' on Maud and Enid's bench.

'Don't just *stand* there girls!' bellowed Miss Hardbroom, 'Catch the creature!'

The entire class took off in pursuit of the frog as it sprang nimbly from bench to bench. Hands clutched and faces loomed, and suddenly Mildred remembered that the class would be making an invisibility potion. (Miss Hardbroom had told them to revise for it after breakfast.) Mildred dived for Ethel's bench, knowing that Ethel would have made the best potion of all, and there it was, dark green and bubbling in the cauldron, with a half-full test-tube conveniently spilling a puddle of the liquid onto the bench. Mildred's frog-tongue shot out and lapped as much as it could.

'Oh, Miss Hardbroom!' she heard Ethel cry, 'The frog's disappeared!'

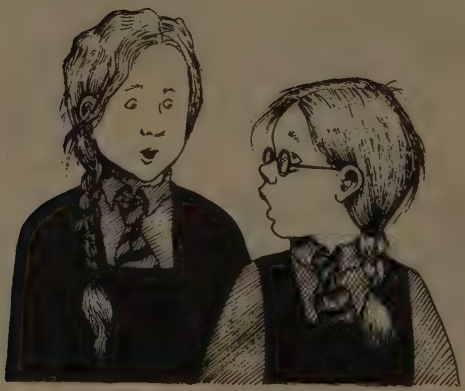
Mildred heaved a sigh of relief and leapt onto the floor where she huddled in perfect silence under the bookcase near the door.

'How very strange,' mused Miss Hardbroom, 'not only the noisiest, but also the most knowledgeable frog I have ever been privileged to meet.'

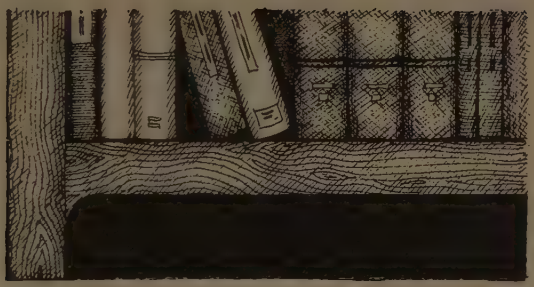
'I'm sure it was trying to tell me something,' whispered Maud to Enid. 'Perhaps it knows something about Mildred?'

'What could a *frog* know?' asked Enid.

Maud shrugged her shoulders. '*I* don't know,' she replied, 'but it was no ordinary frog. I can tell you *that* for certain.'



CHAPTER SIX



Cowering beneath the bookcase, Mildred dared not move in case she had begun to be visible again. (When you have taken an invisibility potion, you reappear very gradually, head first, followed by the rest of the body.)

In fact, being invisible is a very odd sensation indeed. Imagine holding out your leg and feeling it with your invisible hand while being unable actually to see it. For this reason, walking becomes rather a difficult experience as you can feel your feet moving along but cannot

see where they are going. This means that you often find yourself moving in the opposite direction to the one intended which, of course, is extremely annoying.

Mildred held out her arm to see if it had begun to reappear but it hadn't. Her patience paid off at last when she heard Miss Hardbroom tell the girls to pack up their books, and after much clattering and bustling, the door closed and the laboratory fell silent.

Mildred hopped out and looked around. As usual, there was a gap of several inches under the door. In fact, it seemed to be a school speciality that none of the doors fitted properly and the windows (most of which were slit windows) had no glass in them at all. The whole school seemed to have been designed with the sole purpose of freezing all the pupils to death.

Mildred squeezed through the gap and set off as fast as possible along the corridor

and down the spiral staircase to the yard. From there she hopped to the pond at the back of the school, for she felt sure that she could hide safely there in the weeds and rushes while she tried to find some solution to her appalling problem.

Sitting on a stone in the middle of the water was the large frog that Mildred had often seen, and which had been the inspiration for the tale which had scared Ethel's sister.

'Craark!' it said, and to Mildred's delight, she found that she could understand what the creature meant. It said, 'What on earth's the matter with you? Where's the rest of your body?'

Mildred realized that her head had reappeared, which must have looked rather alarming, bobbing about all over the place with no body attached.

'Don't be afraid,' said Mildred. 'I've taken an invisibility potion and I'm just coming back into view. You'll be able to see all of me in a moment.'

'Where did you get the potion from?' asked the frog, slipping silently from the stone and swimming across to Mildred's head.

'Oh dear,' said Mildred, 'it's a long story. I'm not really a frog at all. I'm a second-year witch at the school, and this beastly girl called Ethel Hallow has changed me into a frog and I was –'

'Good gracious me!' exclaimed the frog. 'This is quite amazing! *I'm* not a frog either. I'm a magician. What a wonderful coincidence. I've been here for years and

this is the first conversation I've had with a human for simply ages. How extraordinary! Well, well, well, I can scarcely believe it. Allow me to offer you a nice fly from my store.'

'A *fly*?' repeated Mildred.

'Oh dear,' said the frog-magician. 'Of course, you've only been a frog for a while. A *fly*, my dear, you know, bzzzzzz. They really are quite delicious once you get used to the idea. I nearly starved at first because I couldn't bear the idea of eating – well – insects and the like, but it's amazing what you can get used to.'

Mildred grimaced. 'I'm hoping to be changed back before I get used to it,' she said (with considerable spirit, bearing in mind how hopeless she felt). 'Tell me how you got here in the first place.'

'Well, my dear,' said the frog-magician, settling fatly onto a stone. 'It was so long ago that I've almost forgotten. Let me see ... Yes, well in those days, of

course, the castle was not a school. It was used for meetings and conferences of magicians. We used to have a lovely "do" in the summer. Like a holiday camp it was, endless teas and lectures and displays of magic all afternoon. Anyway, to cut a long story short, I had an argument – rather like *you* did, by the sound of it – with a fellow magician and this was the result. Before I could persuade him to change his mind, the summer was over, everyone went home and I was left behind. I've been here ever since. I must admit I get very glum sometimes.' He breathed a huge sigh and gazed into the dark water.

'Why don't you come with *me*?' said Mildred brightly. 'I'm going to find my friend Maud, after dark. I know I can make her understand, and then she'll be able to help me. She'll help you, too.'

A large tear splashed from the frog-magician's eye. 'It's no use,' he croaked

sadly. 'It's got to be a magician who takes off the spell. There aren't any in the school, are there?'

'No, there aren't,' said Mildred thoughtfully. 'All right then, I'll go to find Maud by myself, but I'll come back for you as soon as I'm changed back and I'll get you to a magician somehow. I won't forget.'

'You're very kind, my dear – What is your name?' said the frog-magician.

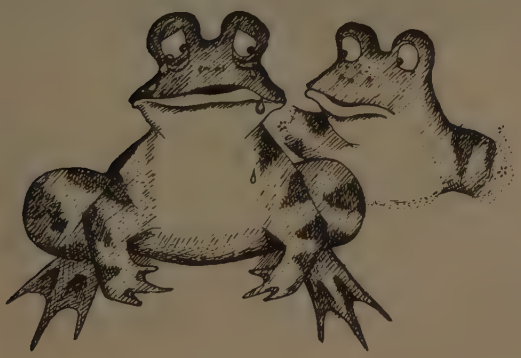
'Mildred Hubble,' replied Mildred. 'What's yours?'

'Algernon er – something-or-other Webb. Isn't that awful?' said the frog-magician. 'Do you know I can't remember the first bit, I've been here so long. What was it now? Bowen-Webb? Stone-Webb? Or was it Webbley-Stone? I'm sorry, child, I've completely forgotten. Oh dear, it was all so very long ago. I must say, sometimes I'd give *anything* to have a proper old-fashioned tea again,

one gets so fed-up with flies and water-boatmen. Every now and then I can see it all so clearly; a nice log fire and a little round table with a tablecloth, and hot toast with great slabs of butter, and crumpets with honey all oozing out of the little holes, and a china cup with steaming tea –'

The memory was too much for him and he erupted into loud, desperate sobs, a pitiful sound to hear.

Mildred hopped next to him and patted him with a half visible arm. 'Don't



cry Mr Algernon, sir,' she said comfortingly. 'You *shall* have crumpets for tea again, don't you worry. It'll be all right, I promise it will.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

Night had fallen and the pupils of the academy were all in bed. That is to say *most* of the pupils were in bed. Enid had sneaked into Maud's room for a quick conference about Mildred. It was bitterly

cold in the cell-like bedroom and the two girls were huddled on the bed, wrapped in blankets, with cats draped over their feet to keep out the cold. (Maud was taking care of Mildred's tabby.)

'Well, I give up,' said Enid. 'If she *has* run away, she's left every single piece of clothing behind – even her cardigan, so she must be frozen solid by now.'

'She *hasn't* run away,' said Maud. '*She* wouldn't have gone just because H.B. told her off. Anyway, she's not likely to have

run away without old Tabby here, especially as that was *why* H.B. was cross in the first place. It just doesn't make sense. No, *I'm* quite sure that Ethel knows something about it. Don't you remember what she said to Mildred? No one insults *my* family and gets away with it. Well *I* think she's done something really awful to Mildred.'

'Like what?' asked Enid.

Just at that moment, the cats all leapt to their feet with their fur on end and looked in the direction of the door. The girls exchanged nervous glances, thinking that it must be Miss Hardbroom come to reprimand them for being out of bed. Maud crept to the door and opened it very slowly.

Outside in the shadowy corridor was the little frog which had escaped from the potion laboratory. Maud and Enid could tell it was the same one because its feet had not yet reappeared.

Mildred hopped inside and was picked up by Maud, who took her over to Enid.

Tabby immediately began nuzzling up against the frog in a very friendly way, unlike the other two cats who kept in the background, backs arched and humming frantically.

'How strange, Enid!' said Maud. 'Look

at Tabby. It seems as if they've met before.'

The two witches suddenly looked at each other in horror.

'Oh *no*!' they exclaimed at the same time.

'It can't be!' gasped Maud. 'Or can it?'

'I think it might be,' replied Enid grimly. She took the frog from Maud and held it up near her face.

'Are you –' she began, but before she could finish, the little frog was leaping up and down, nodding its head and croaking so loudly that the girls were afraid someone would hear.

'Sssh!' whispered Enid. 'Calm down, for goodness' sake. Now then, are you our very good friend, Mildred Hubble?'

There was no doubt about it, from the nodding and mad capering, that here was the answer to Mildred's sudden disappearance.

'Did Ethel do it?' asked Maud.

More nodding and croaking was the answer.

'*Right*!' said Maud. 'Come on, Enid.'

Ethel was not asleep, either. She was sitting up in bed learning the chant which was to be tested the next day. She nearly leapt through the ceiling when the door opened and Maud and Enid marched menacingly into the room.

'Recognize this?' asked Maud, holding out the frog. 'Remind you of anyone, does it?'

Ethel turned white as a sheet. 'I – I don't know *what* you're talking about,' she said.

'All right,' said Maud, 'then we're off to Miss Hardbroom. Come on, Enid. Sorry to have bothered you, Ethel.'

'No!' cried Ethel. 'It's *Mildred*, isn't it? Oh, thank goodness you found her. I didn't *mean* her to run off and get lost. I just wanted to give her a fright, that's all.

GOOD
CONDUCT
Pixel Hollow
TEAM SPIRIT
HONOUR
INITIATIVE

Come here and let me take off the spell.'

'Hold on a moment,' said Enid, 'I think we'd *better* get Miss Hardbroom. I mean, how are we going to explain where Mildred's been?'

'Let's tell her in the morning,' wheedled Ethel. 'She'll be in a dreadful mood if we disturb her tonight. Anyway, I'm sure poor Mildred here can't wait a moment longer.'

Ethel spoke the words of the spell, and at once Mildred was standing before them.

'Thanks for nothing, Ethel Hallow,' she said, rubbing her arms and legs. 'Gosh, it feels really odd to be this big again. Oh Maud, it was so awful in the potion lab, I really thought I'd had it.'

The door opened like a thunderclap, and there stood Miss Hardbroom.

'Having a little party are we, girls?' she inquired drily. 'Ah, Mildred, I see you've decided to rejoin us at last. We hope you

have had a pleasant time wherever you have been. Would it be too much, perhaps, to inquire exactly where you *have* been. Hmm?'

The three friends looked desperately at Ethel who stepped forward with a smirk flickering at the corners of her mouth.

'I caught Mildred creeping down the corridor with Maud and Enid here,' she said innocently. 'So I invited them into my room and I was just coming to fetch you, Miss Hardbroom.'

'*Ethel*!' exclaimed Maud, Enid and Mildred together.

'That's not *true*, Miss Hardbroom,' squeaked Mildred indignantly. 'Ethel turned me into a frog and that's where I've been for the last day, and it was *her* fault. She's only just changed me back.'

'I did *not*,' lied Ethel, sounding convincingly angry. 'I wouldn't *do* such a thing – unlike some people around here,' she added under her breath, referring to the time when Mildred had accidently changed Ethel into a pig during their first term at the school.

'Mildred,' said Miss Hardbroom, 'you will write out five hundred times, in perfect handwriting, "I must learn to curb my imagination and to – " good gracious, girl! What on earth has happened to your feet?'

They all looked and saw that Mildred's feet, still recovering from the invisibility potion, had not yet reappeared, even

though she had changed back to her usual self.

'That *proves* it!' exclaimed Mildred joyfully. 'Miss Hardbroom, *I* was the frog in the potion laboratory, the one you found in the corridor, and the potion I took is only just wearing off, that's why I

haven't any feet at the moment. Oh yes! And to prove it even more, I can tell you that you have a handkerchief, a whistle and a notebook with a rubber band round it in your pocket!'

Miss Hardbroom turned to Ethel.

'*Well*?' she asked, in tones so terrifying that all four of her pupils shrank back against the wall.

'I – I, well – I – she *had* insulted my f-family, Miss Hardb-broom,' said Ethel feebly. 'And I really didn't mean her to run off like that. I only meant to give her a scare. I didn't mean . . .' she trailed into silence.

'Ethel, Mildred,' said Miss Hard-broom, 'you will both come to my room first thing in the morning before break-fast. Now get along to bed at once, all of you.'

Their form-mistress ushered the three friends to their separate rooms. Mildred's room was the last of all.

'Let us hope that your feet are in the correct place by the morning, Mildred,' said Miss Hardbroom frostily, as Mildred hastened inside and closed the door.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Shortly after the rising bell had been rung, Ethel and Mildred were waiting anxiously outside Miss Hardbroom's door. It was the first time that Ethel had been summoned to her formmistress for any reason other than praise.

'It's *your* fault, Mildred Hubble,' she muttered, as they paced up and down the corridor. 'If you hadn't told that stupid story to Sybil and upset her, I wouldn't have done it to you. Anyway, I really *was* going to take the spell off straight away, but of course *you* have to go hopping off and get caught and land us in this mess.'

'*You've* got a nerve, Ethel Hallow!' said Mildred. 'You just can't ever admit you might be wrong, can you? It wasn't exactly *fun* being pursued round the potion lab and shoved into jars. It wouldn't occur to you that –'

The door opened and Miss Hardbroom beckoned them inside.

'Sit,' she barked, indicating two chairs opposite her desk. They all sat down.

'It *wasn't* my fault, Miss Hardbroom!' Ethel blurted out. 'Mildred Hubble told my little sister this story about first-years being changed into frogs by the teachers. She even told Sybil that the frog in the

school *pond* was enchanted, and poor Sybil was in such a state that I thought someone ought to teach Mildred a lesson.'

'It wasn't exactly like that, Miss Hardbroom,' said Mildred. 'I'd gone up to Ethel's sister to cheer her up because she was looking so miserable. I didn't know –'

'I have heard quite enough excuses,' interrupted Miss Hardbroom, 'and I do not wish to hear any more. Frankly, I am not in the least bit interested in whose fault the incident was.

'The reason I have called you both here is to remind you that you are now second-year witches, and I do not expect this ridiculous feud between you two girls to continue. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Miss Hardbroom,' replied Ethel and Mildred meekly.

'Ethel,' continued Miss Hardbroom, 'just because you happen to be an excel-

lent scholar and one of the most helpful members of my class, I do not expect you to lie your way out of a situation when it has become awkward. Do you understand this?'

'Yes, Miss Hardbroom,' said Ethel.

'Neither,' said Miss Hardbroom, 'do I expect you to contravene the Witches Code, rule number seven, paragraph two, by changing your fellows into any sort of animal for what*ever* reason. Do you understand *that*?'

'Yes, Miss Hardbroom,' said Ethel.

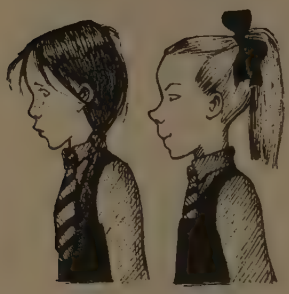
'Good,' said Miss Hardbroom, 'then you will understand why I am giving you one hundred lines which will say "I must tell the truth at all times."'

She turned her attention to Mildred. 'Mildred, I would ask you to refrain from tormenting the first-years with untrue horror stories about the academy, and to make some attempt to *think* – if that is possible – before you embark upon any more madcap escapades.'

'Yes, Miss Hardbroom,' replied Mildred. 'Oh, and Miss Hardbroom, I've just remembered, there *is* a frog in the pond and it really *is* someone under enchantment. I *know* it sounds like another made-up story –'

'Mildred Hubble,' said Miss Hardbroom wearily, 'what have I just said to you? No, don't attempt to answer. I expect you've completely forgotten already, haven't you? Sometimes I feel that any attempt to communicate with you is an utter waste of time.

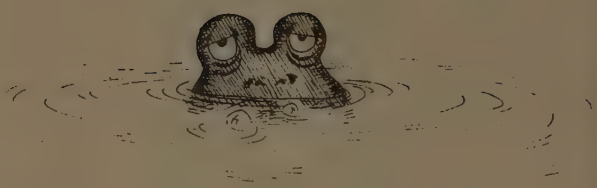
'Now I have said all that I wish to say to you girls except, Mildred, that you will write one hundred lines which will say, "I must try very hard not to be quite so silly." Now hurry along to breakfast, girls. That will be all.'



Mildred was now faced with the impossible task of convincing someone that there was an elderly magician in the pond. She tried to tell Maud and Enid, but they had had enough of frog stories, particularly as Mildred had actually admitted to them, at the time, that the story she had told Sybil was not true.

It seemed quite hopeless. The only way of getting to a magician was at the celebrations on Hallowe'en night, but after the broomstick display, which Mildred had ruined the year before, she felt very worried about creating any more havoc in that direction.

Mildred spent a lot of time by the pond telling the frog-magician that she hadn't forgotten him and that she would get him out if it was the last thing she did. He always kept a distance from her, but she felt sure he knew who she was. Looking at his froggy face, half-submerged in the murky water, it was hard to believe that he really was anything more than an ordinary frog, and Mildred could see why no one had recognized her when she was in the same plight.



CHAPTER NINE

A week before the Hallowe'en celebration, Miss Hardbroom entered the classroom, looking grim.

'Sit, girls,' she said, looking round severely at the rows of pupils. 'I have here a letter from the chief magician, Mr Hellibore, who presides over the Hallowe'en

festivities each year. In this letter he specifically requests that the girls responsible for the utter fiasco, which *should* have been our broomstick display last year, are to be kept away from this year's display so that he can relax and enjoy the events taking place. Those two girls were Ethel Hallow and Mildred Hubble. It is true that the incident was not actually Mildred's fault, for once, because Ethel *had* cast a spell on the broomstick which Mildred was using, but in view of our little *chat* this morning, girls –' here she darted a glance at Ethel and Mildred who wriggled uncomfortably in their seats, 'I feel this is a most fitting punishment for both of you. As you retire to your beds at dusk on the eve of Hallowe'en, perhaps you might ponder upon the exciting evening you *could* have been enjoying and resolve to end this ridiculous feud at last.'

Mildred was very upset at her exclusion from Hallowe'en for several reasons. One

was the awful unfairness of it all, as it really hadn't been her fault that Ethel had cast a bad spell on the broomstick she had lent to Mildred, thus ruining the display. Also it would be very hard to stay in bed and miss the evening's fun. But, worst of all, she would not be able to take her unfortunate friend to be changed back to his normal self, and this was the only night of the whole year when she would be in the presence of a magician.

There was only one thing to do. She would have to persuade someone to change places with her, and if that didn't work she would have to kidnap someone and *force* them to swap places. Even the thought of this plan seemed dreadful to Mildred, who could see how such a course of action was fraught with danger, but there really was no alternative if she was to help the frog-magician.

Maud and Enid were the obvious people to ask but they flatly refused.

'You must be barmy, Mildred,' exclaimed Maud. 'H.B. would *slaughter* us if we got caught. Anyway what's it *for*? I mean if *I* was you I'd just put up with it and stay in bed. Enid and I will describe it all when we come back.'

'Look, Maud,' pleaded Mildred, 'I *know* it's hard for you to believe me, but that frog in the pond really *is* a magician and he can only be changed back by another magician. If you don't want to change places with me, then couldn't you take him yourself and ask the chief magician for help? *Please*.'

'No fear!' said Maud and Enid together.

'Honestly, Mil,' said Enid gently, 'I know it must have been awful when you were turned into a frog, what with the narrow squeak in the potion lab and everything, but don't you think perhaps you're getting a little *obsessed* with frogs and ponds? Maud and I have seen you down there chatting away to the empty

water. Perhaps a nice evening in bed might be good for you, after all.'

Mildred stomped away feeling desperate. If Maud and Enid thought she was mad and wouldn't help her, then no one would and the only course of action was to go ahead with the kidnapping plan. Mildred quailed at the prospect.

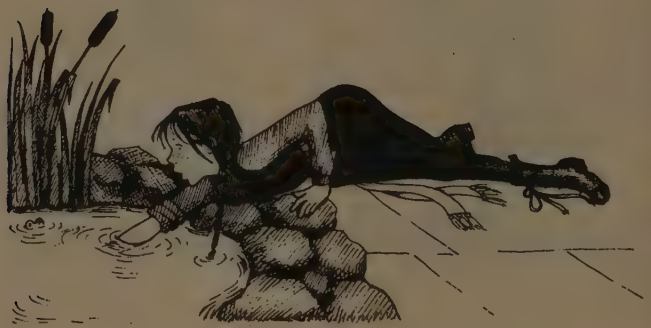
The morning of the celebrations dawned and the whole day was given over to ironing best robes, practising on broomsticks and chanting. Mildred and Ethel sat miserably at their desks, feeling very left out of all the bustle.

As the afternoon drew to a close, Mildred crept downstairs and out into the darkening yard. She hurried to the pond and peered among the reeds to see if her friend was visible.

'Mr Algernon, sir,' she whispered, 'come out, Mr Algernon. I've got something to tell you, sir.'

For a moment the water lay dark and still, then a ripple touched the surface and two green eyes appeared like periscopes.

'Oh, Mr Algernon!' exclaimed Mildred with relief, and before he had time to hide away under a stone, as he usually did, she shot a hand into the water and scooped him up. He did not want to be



caught at all, and although Mildred told him where they were going and tried to soothe him, he struggled madly and looked at her with great suspicion. Mildred slid him carefully into her pocket and raced up the stairs to her room, where she transferred him to a small box with holes in the lid which she had prepared specially for the journey.

'You'll be all right there for a while,' she told him, tying on the lid with a piece of string. 'You mustn't worry. It'll be all right I promise.'

The next step was to find and kidnap a suitable victim. Of course, the easiest thing to do would have been to change someone into a frog or snail or some other small creature which could easily be kept hidden in a box until she returned. But, to be honest, Mildred felt that there had been quite enough animal enchantments in the school to last a lifetime, and it seemed a less desperate measure to do a nice, straightforward kidnap where at least you could see exactly what was happening.

As she came out of her room, Mildred saw a third-year witch named Griselda Blackwood approaching down the corridor, carrying her cat.

'Excuse me!' gasped Mildred. 'Er – I was wondering if you could just come and help me for a moment?'

'Whatever for?' asked Griselda. 'What's the matter, Mildred. You look quite pale.'

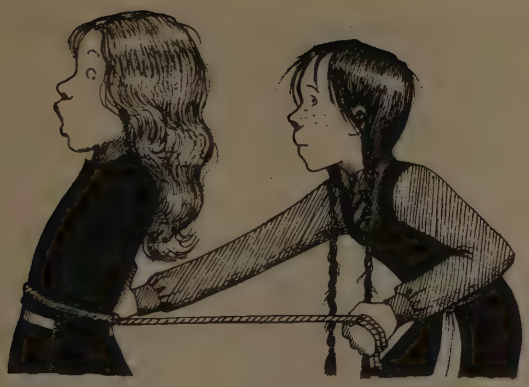
'There's something horrible under my bed!' exclaimed Mildred. 'Could you come and help me get it out?'

'Something horrible?' repeated Griselda, drawing back in alarm. 'Why, what do you mean *something horrible*? You can't really expect me to go fishing about underneath your bed if I don't even know what I might find under it, now can you?'

'It's a er – beetle!' replied Mildred triumphantly. 'I've got this *thing* about beetles. A horrid brown one with pincers ran up my pyjama leg once and I've never got over it. Please help me, Griselda. I won't get a wink of sleep otherwise.'

'A beetle!' laughed Griselda. 'Is that all? I thought it must be a tarantula at least with all the fuss you're making. Come on, then.'

While Griselda was half under the bed, feeling about, Mildred very stealthily tied her bootlaces together.



'I can't seem to find anything,' said Griselda, shuffling out and sitting back on her heels.

As quick as a flash, Mildred pulled out a lasso of rope which she had hidden in a drawer and slipped it over the astonished girl's head and shoulders, yanking it tightly enough to bind her arms to her sides. Before the poor victim had a chance to scream, Mildred had tied a gag around her mouth. As a last resort, Griselda tried to run for it, but of course her bootlaces were tied together so she fell flat on her back.

'I'm really ever so sorry to do this to you,' apologized Mildred humbly, as she tied Griselda's ankles together with her sash. 'It's really in a very good cause and I'll explain everything to you later when I get back. I'm so sorry, I really am. I don't usually go around doing this sort of thing. I hope you don't mind *too* dreadfully.'

Griselda stared up at Mildred from the floor with horror.

'Mmmmmmmm!' she raged through the gag, 'mm-mmm, mmmm-mm, mm, mm, mm, mm, mmmm!'

Mildred pulled some bedclothes from her bed and covered Griselda tenderly.

'There really isn't any point in shouting,' said Mildred, putting a pillow underneath the victim's head. 'No one can hear you. They're all getting ready in the playground. I'll borrow your cat if you don't mind. Mine's awful on a broom and anyway it's too easy to recognize.'

Mildred changed from her ordinary school uniform to the best robes which the girls always wore for special occasions. She unplaited her hair and shook it out loose. (The whole school, including the teachers, always wore their hair loose when they dressed in their best robes.) She put on her cape and turned up the collar and pulled her hat low over her eyes.

There was a soft 'meeow' from the top of the wardrobe, and Mildred saw her little tabby cat watching reproachfully as she prepared to go without it.

'Oh Tabby,' said Mildred, reaching up and tickling its chin, 'I can't take you or the whole school will recognize us.'

She picked up the box with the frog-magician in it and wedged it into her cape pocket. Then she slung Griselda's cat around her shoulders and took her broomstick from its place against the wall.

'Good-bye, Griselda,' said Mildred, slinking out of the room feeling like a criminal. 'I won't be long and then I'll explain everything and you won't be cross any more.'

CHAPTER TEN

ut of the window, as she hastened down the spiral staircase, Mildred saw the fires which were being lit in the ruins of the old castle where the celebrations were always held. Her heart pounded as she joined the throng of girls in the gloomy yard, all looking most dramatic with their hair loose and their long black robes and witches' hats.

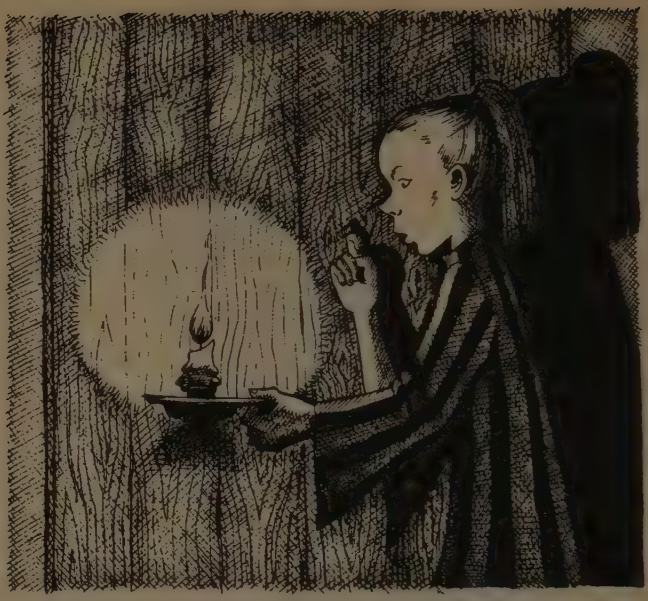
'Thank goodness, it's almost dark,' thought Mildred, tagging on to the end of form three as their form-mistress counted them all.

'Is everyone accounted for?' asked Miss Cackle.

All the form-mistresses answered 'yes' in turn, and the pupils began their flight to the castle.

The school receded into the distance as the pupils skimmed above the treetops, and Mildred was grateful that no talking was allowed in flight, so nobody could ask her any awkward questions. The borrowed cat was a wonderful balancer, and Mildred felt rather disloyal as she found herself thinking how nice it would be to have a well-behaved sleek black cat which she could feel proud of.

Back at the academy, Ethel sat fuming in bed and watched from her window as the pupils rose like a flock of bats into the twilight and sailed away without her. She



picked up her candle and decided to go along to Mildred's room and have a grumble at her.

Outside Mildred's room, Ethel pressed her ear against the door and was surprised to hear a strange noise from within.

'Mildred?' called Ethel, knocking softly. The noise grew louder.

'Mmmmmm! Mmmm, mm, mmm!'

Ethel opened the door and held up her

candle to reveal the awful sight of Mildred's victim trussed up on the floor.

'What on earth has happened to you?' gasped Ethel, untying the gag and pulling at the knots in the sash and rope.

'It's that Mildred Hubble!' said Griselda, who was almost in tears. 'She must have gone berserk. She got me in here under false pretences, tied me up, stole my cat and went to the display in my place. Honestly, Ethel, she sounded really mad, wittering on about beetles up her pyjama leg and suchlike. Whatever shall we do?'

'Go after her, of course!' answered Ethel, delighted at the thought of the praise they would get when they revealed Mildred's wicked behaviour.

'Come on, Griselda, I'll change into my outdoor clothes and meet you in the yard with my broom in five minutes. We'll have to hurry. Goodness knows what that girl is planning!'

'All right,' agreed Griselda. 'I'll run and fetch my broom.'

Meanwhile, the academy was alighting on the castle hillside and being welcomed by the chief magician and all the other witches and magicians. The chief magi-

cian, Mr Hellibore, looked most imposing in his purple robe embroidered with moons and stars and a tall, pointed hat. Mildred would have been absolutely thrilled by it all if she had not been so terrified of the task ahead of her.

There was a long delay between the pupils' arrival and the commencement of the displays and chanting, during which Miss Cackle and the teachers greeted friends and acquaintances, and the girls all stood to attention, being neat and well-behaved and a credit to the school.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the sky and everyone looked up to see Ethel and Griselda swooping down on their brooms, waving and shouting.

'Mildred Hubble's down there!' shrieked Ethel.

'She kidnapped me!' yelled Griselda. 'And she tied me up, so she could come in my place!'

'That's enough now, girls, thank you,' ordered Miss Cackle, who was not at all pleased at such unseemly shrieking from her girls.

Miss Hardbroom strode across to the rows of pupils and Mildred pulled her hat even lower over her face. From under the brim she could see the chief magician nearby, looking rather puzzled at all the shouting.

'If you *are* here, Mildred,' said Miss Hardbroom, 'I would advise you to step forward at *once* and explain yourself.'

The pupils all began looking round at each other and Mildred knew there was little time before someone recognized her. There was no alternative but to make a dash to the magician before anyone could catch her. Summoning every scrap of courage, Mildred suddenly barged through the rows of pupils and threw herself in front of Mr Hellibore.

'Please forgive me, Your Honour,' she said, thrusting the box containing her friend into his hands. 'I know you didn't want me to come here tonight, but there is an enchanted magician in that box and I promised him that I would get him to

you so that you could change him back. I'm so sorry to cause such a lot of trouble but I didn't know what else to do.'

'What on earth is all this nonsense about?' asked the chief magician sternly. 'And are my eyes deceiving me or are you not the girl who *ruined* the broomstick display last year? If so –'

'We do apologize most humbly, Your Honour,' grovelled Miss Hardbroom, seizing Mildred's arm in a vice-like grip. 'The girl seems to have taken leave of her senses –'

'I *haven't*, Miss Hardbroom!' interrupted Mildred. '*Please*, Your Honour, Mr Hellibore, sir, it really *is* a magician. His name is Algernon Webb-something, Stonely-Webb, oh *something* like that, only he couldn't quite remember. He's been a frog for simply ages.'

'Good gracious me!' exclaimed Mr Hellibore. 'Do you know, Miss Hardbroom, it might just be Algernon Rowan-

Webb. He was my room-mate in the days when your school was used as a sort of summer camp for magicians and he actually *did* disappear one day and we all thought he must have gone home. But it was *decades* ago – why the poor chap! If you'll excuse me, Miss Hardbroom.'

Mildred kept her eyes firmly closed as the chief magician opened the box and intoned the release spell. Suddenly there was a gasp from the crowd. Mildred opened her eyes and breathed a huge sigh of relief.

Standing in front of them was an extremely old man with a beard that trailed on the ground and long flowing white hair. He was very bent over and was rubbing his eyes as if he couldn't quite believe it.

'*Algy*, old chap!' exclaimed the chief magician with joy. 'It's *Egbert*, your old friend, don't you remember?'

'Egbert!' replied Algernon. 'Yes, of

course, I remember, though you were a lot younger in those days. Excuse me a moment, I shall have to sit down. It's all a bit much for me after all these years as a frog. My legs and arms feel awfully cramped. Egbert Hellibore! Well, well, what a piece of luck.'

'The luck came from your little friend here,' said Mr Hellibore, placing a hand on Mildred's shoulder. 'This child braved all our displeasure to bring you here.'

Mildred felt very shy as the vast crowd fell silent and every pair of eyes swivelled in her direction.

'Do you remember me, Mr Rowan-Webb, sir?' asked Mildred. 'We were frogs together.'

'*Remember* you?' repeated Algernon. 'My dear Mildred, how could I ever forget you. No one ever had a truer friend. Without your help I would have been a frog for ever. And please call me Algernon.'

'Well, Miss Hardbroom,' said Mr Hellibore, 'we can hardly send the girl back to school again after this act of heroism, now can we?'

Miss Hardbroom ground her teeth and managed a horribly false smile. 'Whatever you wish, Your Honour,' she replied.

'Is there anything you would like as a reward my child?' asked Mr Hellibore, smiling kindly down at Mildred.

Mildred thought for a moment. 'Oh yes, sir!' she replied. 'There *is* one thing.'

She stepped forward on tiptoe and whispered in his ear.

'Is that *all*?' said Mr Hellibore with a laugh. He leaned across and quietly told the ancient magician what Mildred had asked for. Algernon smiled dreamily. 'What a wonderful memory you have, my dear,' he said. 'Yes, that would be very nice, very nice indeed.'

The crowd watched in fascinated

silence as Mr Hellibore snapped his fingers and a small table appeared in his hand set with a white table-cloth, tea for three, and a huge plate of toast, crumpets and butter. Algernon peered at the table, then snapped *his* fingers and a pot of honey appeared. 'Mustn't forget *that*,' he commented as he set it on the table and, with a glow of pride, Mildred walked away arm-in-arm with the two most important people at the celebrations, to have a proper old-fashioned tea by the nearest bonfire.

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